
The future of electronic entertainment issue#2
EDGE®
PLAYSTATION2 XBOX PC GBA
Previewed: Blinx 2, Pirates, Ratchet & Clank 3, GoldenEye, Ghost Recon 2, Mercenaries, Snowblind, Splinter Cell 3
Reviewed: Pikmin 2, Evil Genius, Pro Evolution Soccer 4, Star Wars Battlefront, OutRun 2, Demon Stone, Rocky Legends
Ico 2
A second chance for the best game you never played
Tokyo Game Show
Who will save Japan's declining games market?
Taking on Goliath
David McLean puts Xbox in perspective
Real 3D displays
See your games through new eyes
November 2004 $8.95 Australia

This battle doesn't call for a hero.

It calls for a saviour.

Register today on halo2.com.au for loads of cool prizes, exclusive downloads and the latest Halo 2 updates!



BUNGiE



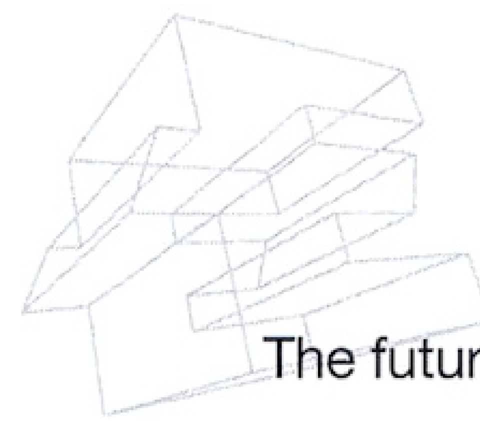




On November 9th

Earth Will Never Be The Same





enter

The future of electronic entertainment



Ever find yourself trying to explain the merits of a videogame to somebody who still clearly sees them as an inferior form of entertainment? It's a problem that plagues many avid gamers trying to justify their fascination with taking on virtual adventures rather than embarking on real-life ventures of their own.

The problem lies not so much with the inability of gamers to express what's good about gaming, but rather the fact that few games are truly beautifully presented. You can gesticulate all you like at a pile of pixel-perfect simulations, but few developers can fashion a game that has the same sort of magical charm and appeal of, say, a classic Disney film. *Ico* was one of the few games that could boast that sort of appeal, but even the best game in the world won't sell if nobody knows about it. With the average punter unconsciously looking for quick-fix gratification in their games rather than artistic fulfilment, it's easy to see why *Ico* slipped beneath most radars.

Gamers who care about the idea of 'games as art' can't continue to let this happen unless they're prepared to accept that the suits have won, and that artistic focus shall always take a back seat in game development. Artists look for that sort of focus in other forms of entertainment media before they take them seriously.

Why should gamers care what the 'art crowd' think? Because that 'crowd' is overflowing with outstanding and creative ideas, but they're often struggling to find an outlet they can make a living from. If gaming becomes a more viable outlet for their imaginations, then it's the gamers who will ultimately reap the benefits.

As you'll discover in our feature on *Ico 2*, the wheels are already in motion to turn one of the most beautiful games ever made into something more familiar, with health bars and other furniture people feel lost without.

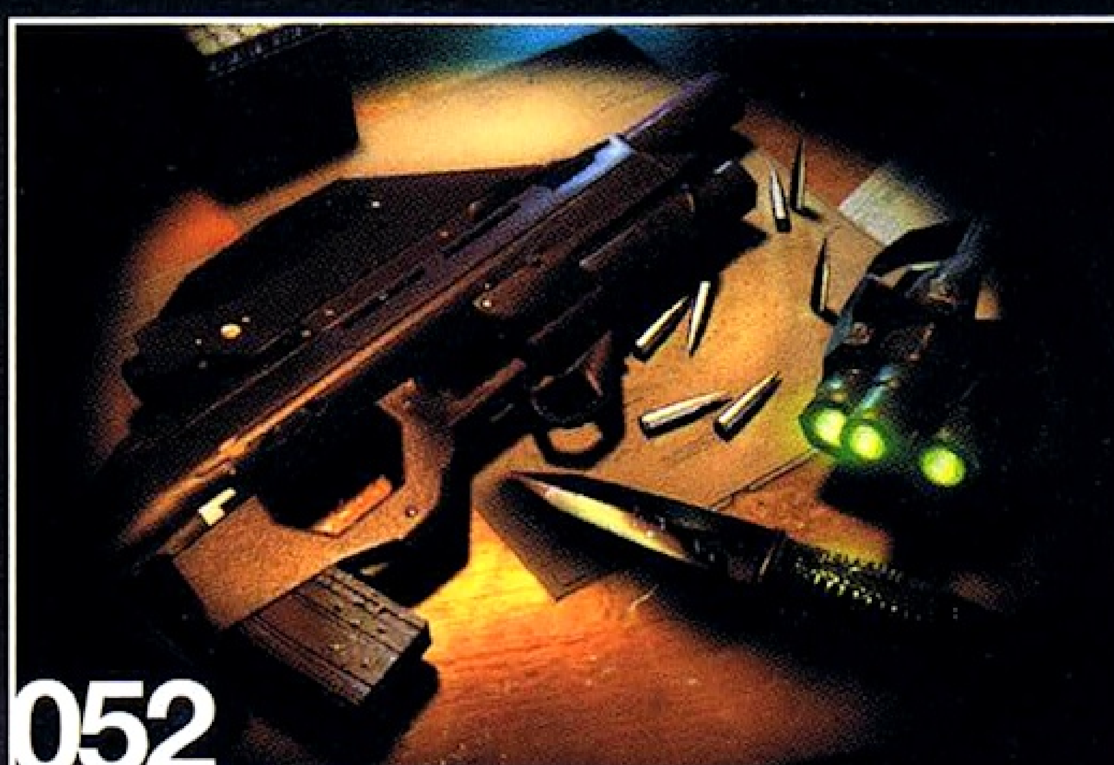
Do the future of gaming a favour: help point out the merits of games like *Ico* to the less discerning. 



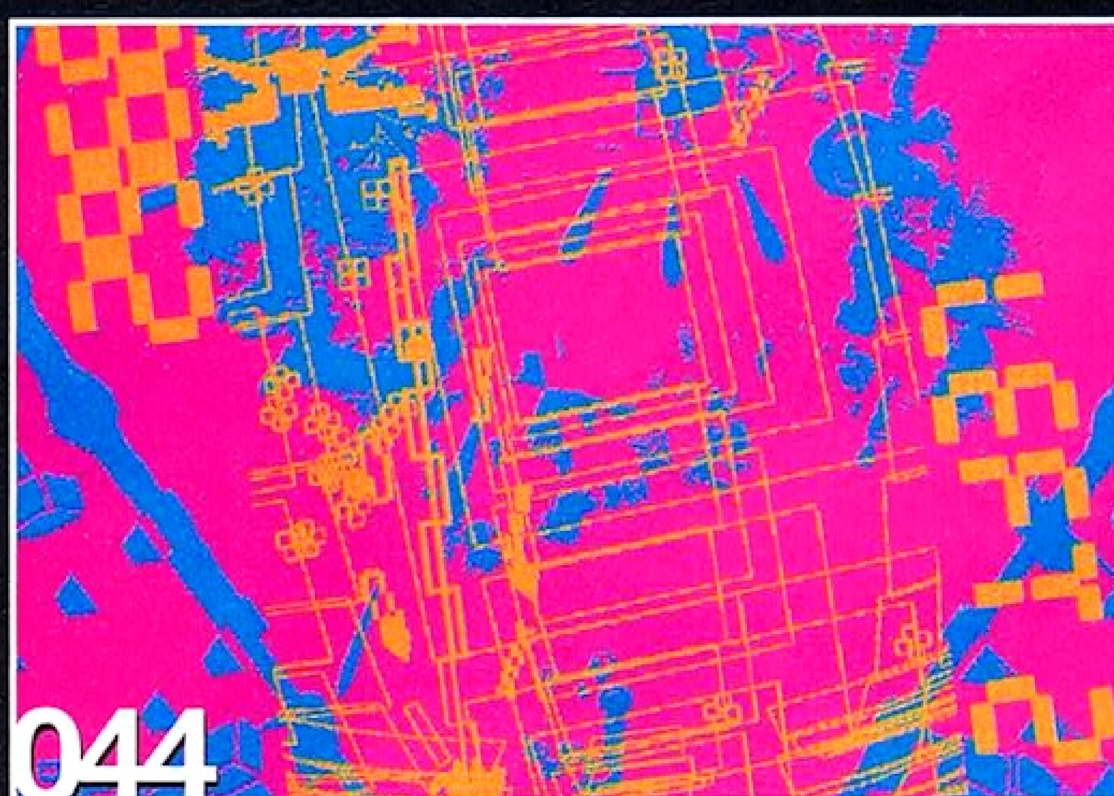
Features













EDGE

Edge Australia is published by Derwent Howard, the publisher of the Official PlayStation 2 Magazine Australia, the Official Australian Xbox Magazine, the Official Australian Windows XP Magazine, PC Games Addict, T3 and What DVD.

Director: Jim Flynn
Director: Nathan Berkley
Financial Director: Gary Peroy
Tel +61 2 9386 4666

www.derwenthoward.com.au

DERWENT HOWARD

Editorial
Derwent Howard
PO Box 1037
Bondi Junction, NSW 1355

Telephone +61 2 9386 4666
Fax +61 2 9386 4288
Email edge@derwenthoward.com.au

People on Edge
Dan Toose editor
Tony Mott associate editor
Kevin Cheung managing editor
Richie Young managing editor
Claire Timpson art editor
Darren Phillips associate art editor
Margaret Robertson games editor
Ian Evenden production editor
Andrew Hind deputy art editor
Ben Schroder staff writer
Christophe Kagotani Tokyo bureau

Production
Sue Walll production manager

Circulation
Karen Day circulation manager

Marketing
Georgina Sanders marketing manager

Advertising
Cathy Snell advertising manager
Advertising phone +61 2 9386 4666

Senior management
Paul Hardy assistant publisher
Jim Flynn director
Nathan Berkley director
Gary Peroy financial director
Nick Cutler advertising director
Wayne Box financial controller
Chris Ganden creative director

Contributors
James Cottee, Simon Wan, Nick Aspell, Steven Bailey, Mr Biffo, João Diniz-Sanches, Kieron Gillen, Jon Jordan, Andrew Lowe, Steven Poole, James Price, RedEye, Sam Richards, Keith Stuart, Mark Walbank, John Walker, Oliver Welsh

Subscriptions
Call the Subscriptions Hotline now on 1800 007 820
Or subscribe online at www.derwenthoward.com.au.

Production of Edge
Hardware: Power Macintosh G3, G4, G5, eMac & iMac
Software: QuarkXPress, Adobe Photoshop & InDesign

Derwent Howard Pty Ltd
Level 3, 59-75 Grafton Street,
Bondi Junction, NSW 2022, Australia
Ph. +61 2 9386 4666
Fax +61 2 9386 4288



directory november

the 'look at the size of that thing' issue



















Regulars

Prescreen

Testscreen

Printed in Australia by **Webstar**
Distribution by **Gordon & Gotch**

Salivating over the sequel to Sony's best game ever...

Tokyo Game Show 2004

Japan's once exclusively indigenous video game show has now opened up to foreign imports, showing the road ahead for a nation deeply troubled by recession

Japan has been mired in a deep recession for over a decade. Faddish reporting in the 1980s confidently predicted the rigid, ruthless traditionalism of the Japanese would soon lead them to surpass the economic might of the Americans. Yet the reverse has proven true, with staid business practices holding back the potential of an otherwise energetic people.

Slowly, but surely, economic reforms are revealing the weakness of an especially ingrained sector of the Japanese economy: video games. Here is a perfect microcosm of the seductive appeal of isolationism, and its disastrous effects on the buying public.

Fixated on cultural continuity, the Japanese game market has traditionally been geared solely towards local consumption. Hence products catering to a wide variety of niche genre types: games where you drive a commuter train, games where you seduce schoolgirls, and so forth. Products with export potential were often happy accidents, and gaming imports were virtually non-existent. The same is true for PC gaming. That cumbersome, inelegant invention of the Americans makes up a tiny part of the Japanese gaming sector, with sales dominated by mediocre romance simulators. Champions of anti-globalisation need only look at Japanese gaming to see a prime example of an entire nation turning its back on foreign imports – and, subsequently, the folly therein.

For as the Japanese economy twitches back to life, its gaming sector – the largest in the world – is in free fall. For the past two years sales have contracted by 11%, at a time when sales for entrenched consoles (GC and PS2) should be exploding. The only explanation is that the Japanese are tiring of some of the more baroque aspects of their gaming culture. RPGs mired in pointlessly complex statistics, unwieldy and uninspiring action games, the same old dating sim clichés… they're tiring of the poor variety and high prices borne of their protectionist market.

The Japanese public demands quality, and unable to get it from local content, they're beginning to resort to the unthinkable: imports from abroad. Keen to make inroads into this enormous market, the titans of Western gaming are rising to the challenge. This second American invasion is meeting stiff resistance, but also some success, and in the most unlikely places. This year's Tokyo Game Show revealed how many inroads imports have made, and just how far they've got to go.





Sony's booth was dominated by their new entrant into the mobile gaming market, the PSP. Industry, press, and the general public were free to ply it's wonderful shape, stare at its gorgeous screen, and ponder exactly how they're going to scrape up the dough to buy one.

What Not To Do

The clear underdog in the import stakes was Microsoft, spread out across one of the largest booths at the exhibition. With sales roughly analogous to the old 3DO



console (ie, woefully poor), the Xbox is not a force in Japanese gaming. Yet Microsoft has not given up, pushing their strategic investment on the value of its Xbox Live broadband service.

Unveiled at the TGS was a Live enabled device seemingly custom-made for that Japanese species of shut-in, the Otaku. *Video Chat* turns Live into a 21st century video phone, allowing you to communicate with your friends & family, (or even your lover, suggests the press release). A more, market-smart move from Microsoft.

Hardcore fighting game fans are catered for with the likes of *Street Fighter Anniversary Collection* and *SNK Vs Capcom: Chaos*, which Live can bring from the arcade to the living room. Another novelty for the Japanese gamer, the FPS, was championed by *Halo 2*. Further evidence of Microsoft's determination was a new bundle, flogging four (4) games with the machine, including the brand-new puzzler, *Blinx 2*.

But it suffices to say that the Master Chief isn't exactly a gaming icon yet in Japan. Going in with all guns blazing is no way to sell your product to the traditional or the cautious. Subtlety and cultural sensitivity is; softly softly, selly gamey.

Despite massive, multi-million sales success in the west, it took well over a year for *Grand Theft Auto III* to make it to Japan.

Beyond Borders

Sometimes, all you have to do is offer the public something new. Despite massive, multi-million sales success in the west, it took well over a year for *Grand Theft Auto III* to make it to Japan. It enjoyed modest success, and has paved the way for other genre-busting entrants. *XIII* is another prime example, a first person shooter with a unique cel-shaded look. *True Crime: The Streets of LA* was on display at TGS, along with more timely releases from the sprawling EA booth.

Blockbusters have a way of transcending language barriers, and the world's largest game company was pushing *GoldenEye*, *Star Wars: Battlefront* and even *The Sims 2* at the show. The script itself may have been in Japanese, but they spoke the language of western gaming: shooters, wargames, and PC simulations, respectively.

Sometimes, all that's needed is a little bit of nomenclature tweaking. Pixar's animated movies have done very well in Japan, but a title like *The Incredibles* doesn't fully mesh







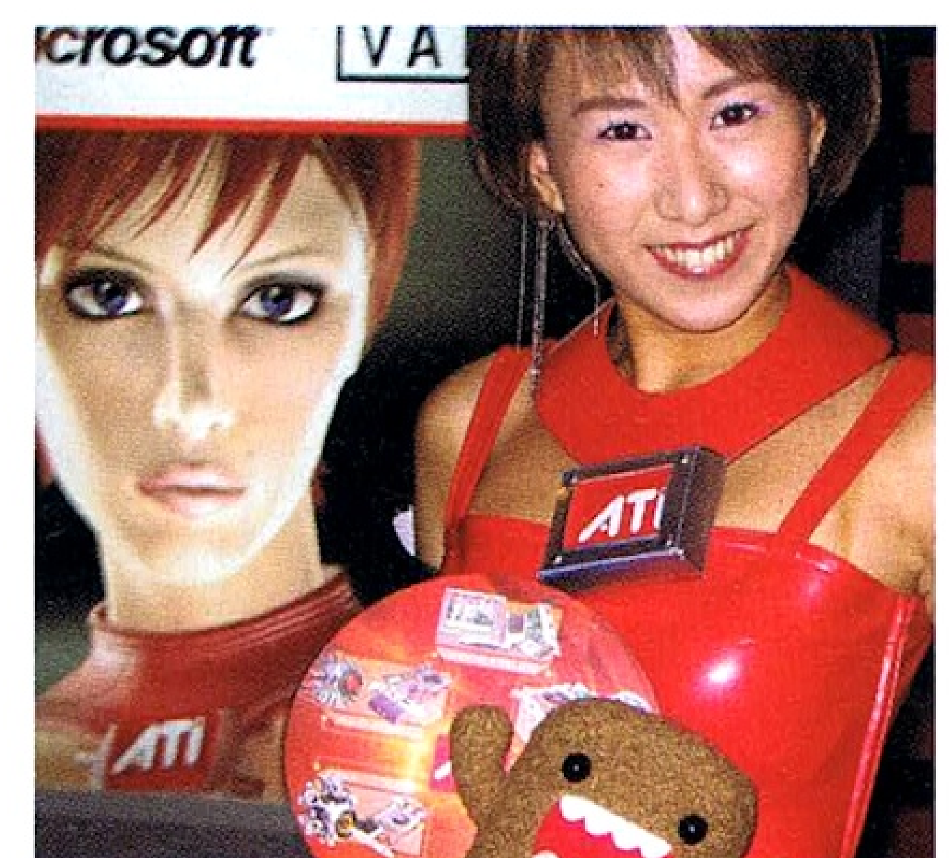
Mystery Men: Nintendo Skip Out On TGS

Neither Nintendo nor its new dual-screened handheld were at the show – possible reasons include animosity with convention management (Nintendo usually has its own expo, Space World), and the thought of appearing inferior to the glossy PSP. Never the less, the affordable DS shows exciting possibilities of its own, like wireless internet connectivity.

It's a mystery then as to why Nintendo had no official presence at the show, considering its prominent role in the only territory where the Gamecube console has been a success. With hotly anticipated games like the new *Zelda* coming to GC, this silence was deafening.



For a taste of culture shock, one need go no further than the suited characters promoting the games.



with Japanese culture. Change that to the slightly more patriarchal "Mr. Incredible," and suddenly you've tapped into the zeitgeist.

The Eyes Have It

The *EyeToy* was another innovation on display, with Japanese companies latching on to the user-friendly potential of the device. *Sega All Stars* was a prime example, with Sonic and his pals populating one of a new breed of infectious party games. *Samba De Amigo* translated perfectly, with any handy object filling in for pesky specialised maraca controllers.

While Sony manufactures and profits from the *EyeToy*, the truth of its lineage was not widely advertised: the gadget was invented by the English. International partnerships are an inevitable result of global commerce, and serve to accelerate the evolution of the industry. Increasingly, this is a two-way-street, with the Japanese finally starting to benefit from developments abroad.

The New Wave

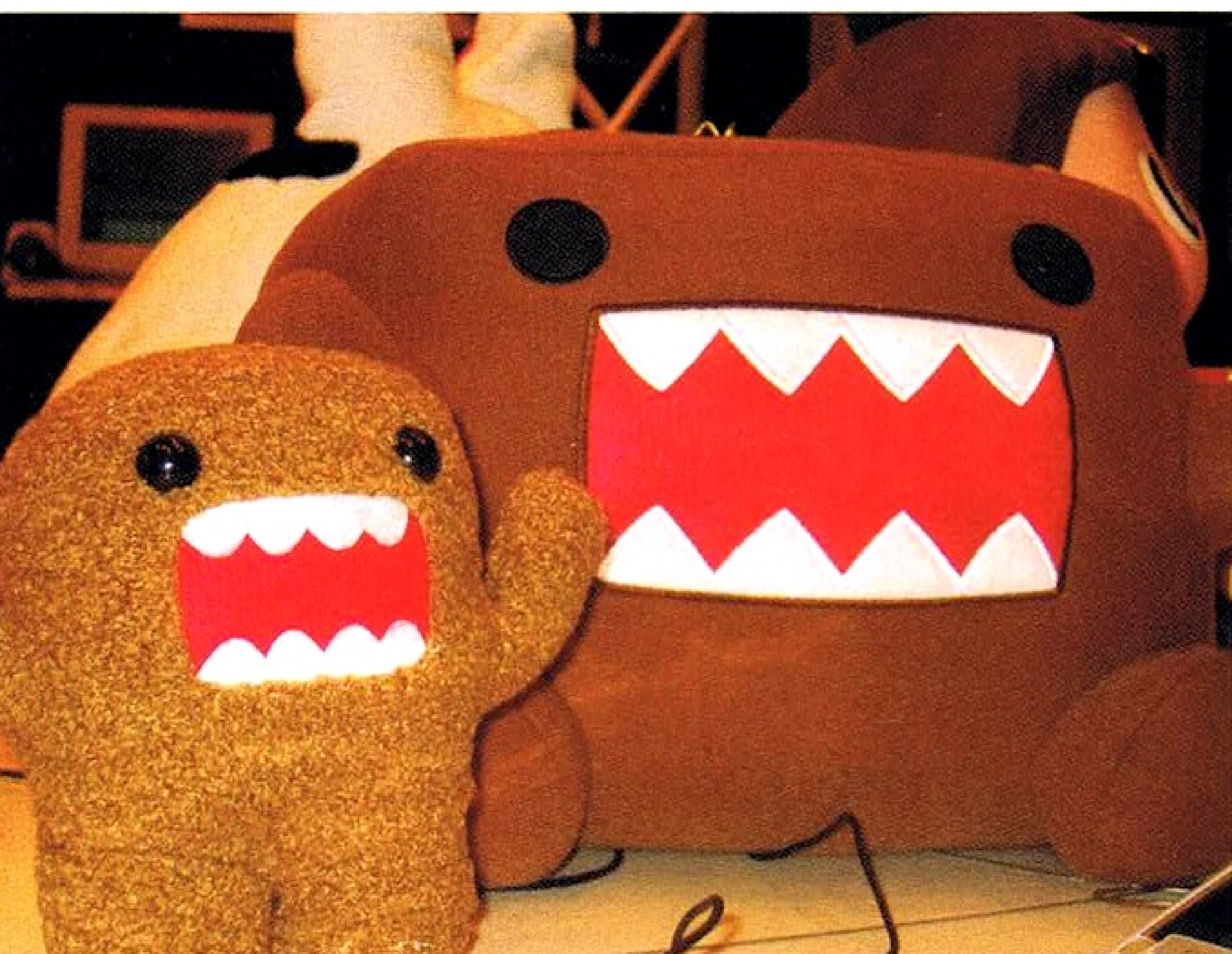
Another glimpse over the gaming horizon came from NC Soft, the group behind the explosively popular *City of Heroes*. Makers of massively multiplayer online games, they sell a cornucopia of variants of a theme, from the fantasy action of *Lineage II* to the more contemporary *After Life*. Given the rise of cyber café gaming, this would seem like a logical inclusion at the show, but it in reality hints at a far more significant cultural shift – thawing relations between Korea and Japan.

Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater

Simultaneously displays properties of what's right and wrong with Japanese gaming. MGS 2s sneaking and boss confrontation gameplay was sullied by the drudgery of long cut scenes – let's hope Kojima-san has a more terse game ready for us come December











Lineage 2

Thanks to post-colonial animosity, the PC-led gaming boom in Korea has been largely ignored in Japan. No longer – vast exhibits and blanket advertising suggest that the Japanese may finally be waking up to the addictive pleasure of the MMORPG

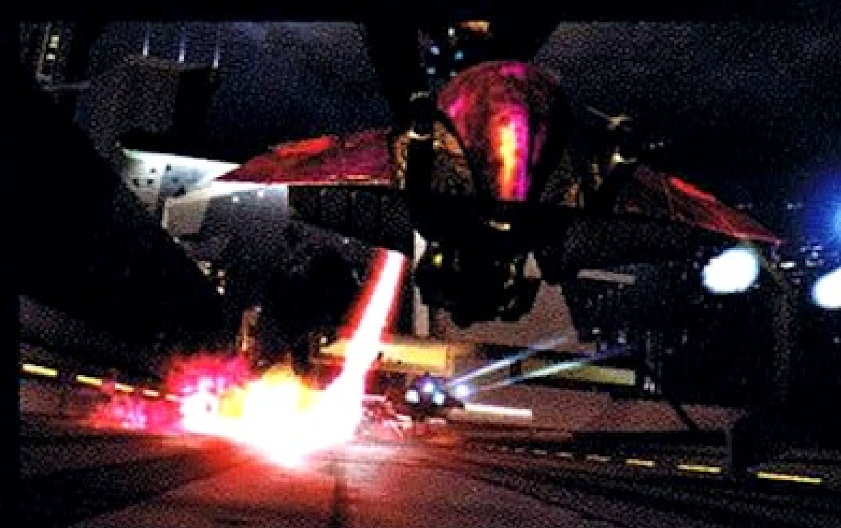




Halo 2

Miniscule Xbox sales in Japan haven't scared off Microsoft. With the largest exhibit at the show, the software giant had eight-player death-matches of *Halo 2* running for anyone patient enough to brave the queue.





World 4 Kids - Unlike the adults-only E3 show in LA, the Tokyo Game Show has a special area set aside for young children







Korea has never forgiven the Japanese for the brutality suffered under their rule, and this has manifested in almost completely separate gaming cultures. But with Nvidia and ATI pushing their wares hard, signs suggest a gradual warming to the PC format. With it comes a wealth of gaming genres: RTS, FPS, and that game of choice across the Sea of Japan, the MMORPG.

More of the same?
An important distinction must be made between the Tokyo Game Show and its larger American counterpart, E3. Whereas E3 is exclusively an industry event, the TGS is open to the public. Well over 100,000 ordinary gamers walked through its halls this year, viewing exhibits designed not to coldly reflect their buying habits, but rather their aspirations. There was even a special hall set aside for young children, where they could sample the *Viewtiful Joe* cartoon and play the games of tomorrow.

Younger Japanese are more open to new ideas, and their willingness to sample foreign wares is forcing local companies to try harder. This market reality is leading to genuine cultural exchange and enrichment, not to mention better products forged in the crucible of competition. With new ideas, new IPs, and new blood, and a little help from its friends, the Japanese games industry may just be able to turn itself around.

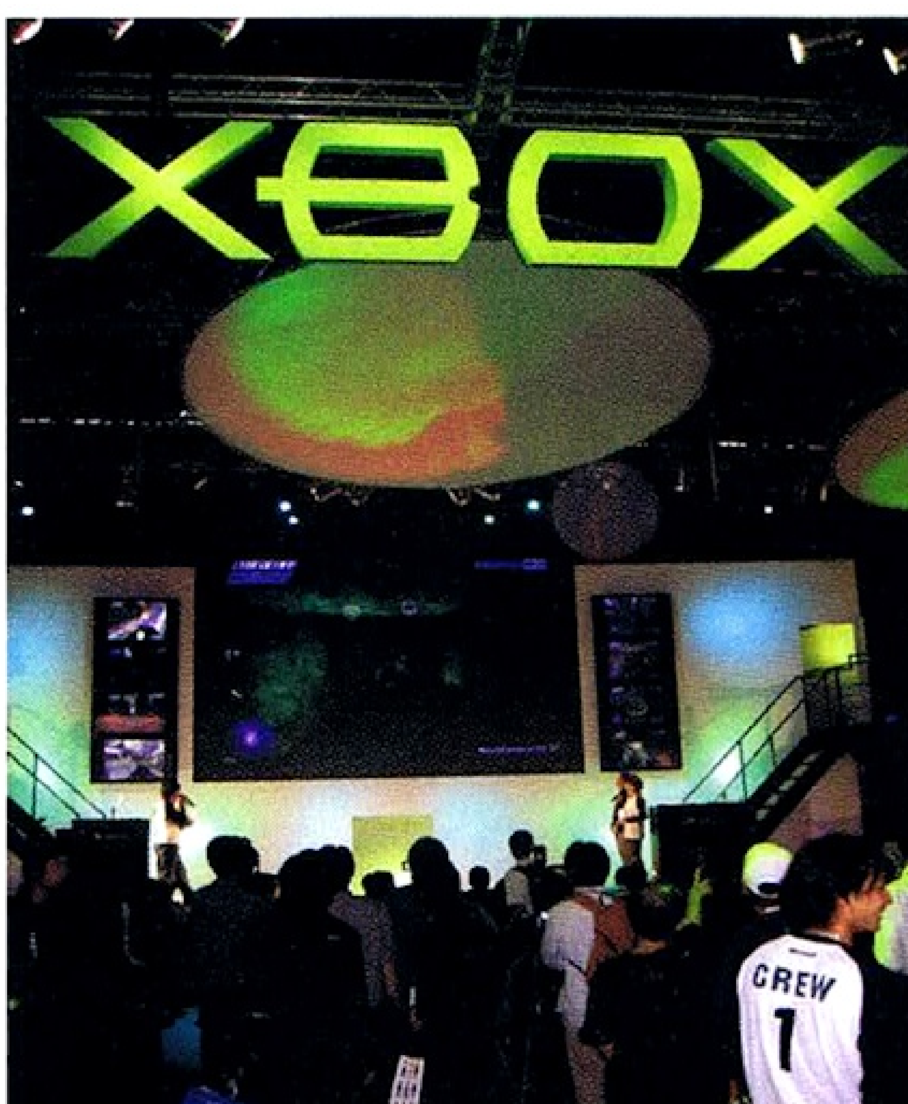


Sony PSP

Without doubt the star of the show. Under a giant effigy of the new handheld Sony had a phalanx of demo machines set up so that press and public alike could get serious hands-on time. Boasting sumptuous picture quality, splendid ergonomic design, and nifty multimedia functionality, the PSP promises to be well worth its expected US $349.99 (roughly $489) asking price.







Microsoft's massive marketing effort included eight-way comps on the latest *Halo 2* build and real-time translation of the E3 presentation.



Taking on Goliath…

Edge talks to David McLean, Regional Director of Microsoft Home Entertainment Division on the company's foray into a new market

Moving into a new market is never easy, and although Sony proved it could be done gracefully with the PlayStation, nobody expected Microsoft to be able to surpass their efforts when they launched the Xbox

Of course, three years down the track it's obvious that Microsoft's first console had what it took to firmly establish itself in the market, even if not as the leader.

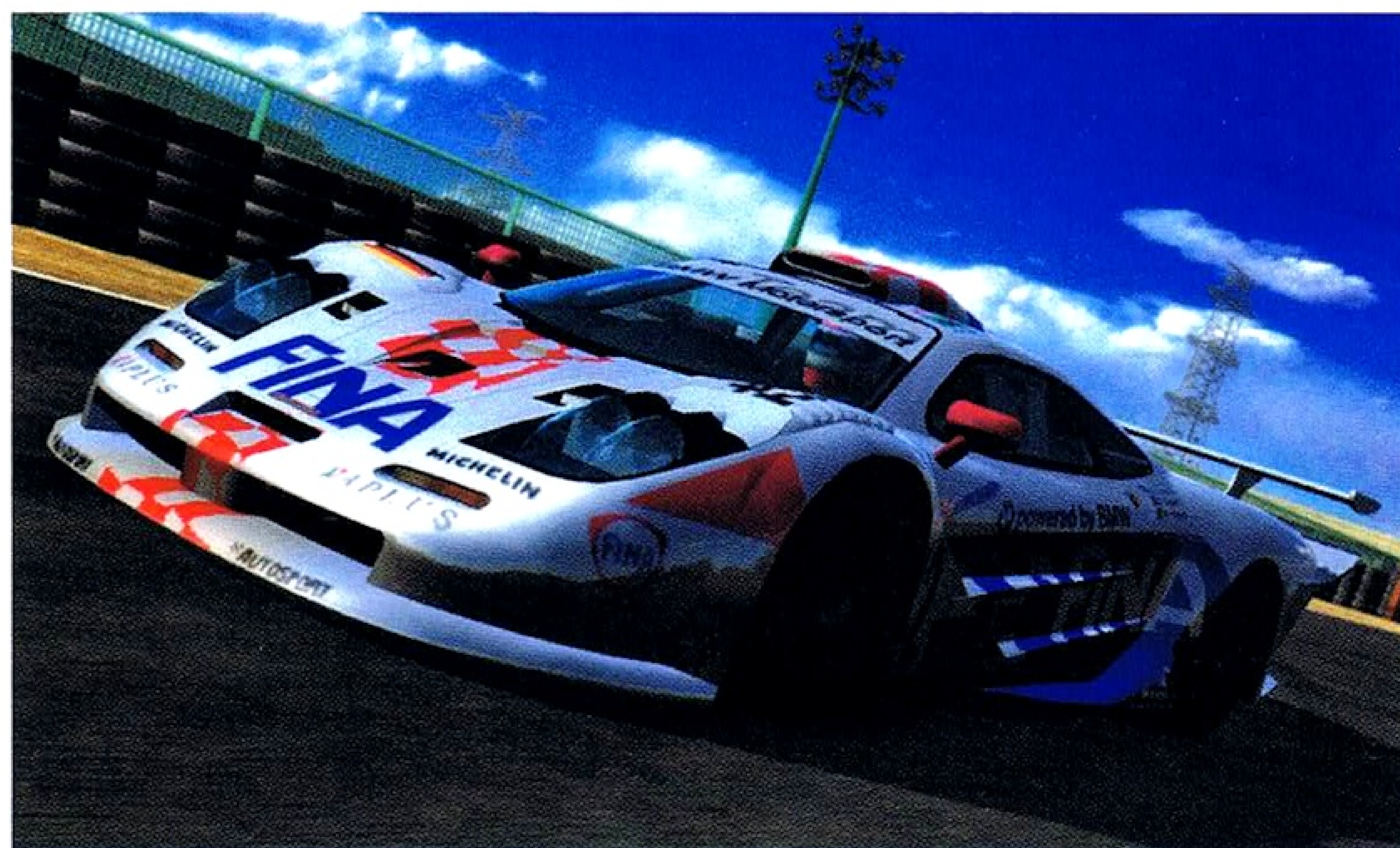
With those years to reflect upon, the Regional Director of Microsoft's HED (Home Entertainment Division) for Australia and New Zealand, Mr. David McLean gave **Edge** an insight into the company's take on their first steps into a new frontier.

"We think that we've played the game at a high level, and frankly we think we're in a position now to lead the game," he declared, "We've got 600,000 consoles in Australian homes and we've certainly reached a critical mass now and created, I think a very solid ecosystem around the platform with retail, media, partners, publishers and most importantly gamers. I think we'll just continue to move from strength to strength as the momentum continues to build on the work we've done so far. We continue to grow our market share, and as long as the momentum continues to shift in favour of the Xbox, we think that we'll continue to be successful."

Microsoft's history is one of authority, monopoly and utter market domination. **Edge** asked McLean what the OS giants have learned from their time in what is for them, a very different, new area.

"I think the first thing that we learned quickly was that a world class portfolio was absolutely essential. As such we continue to focus our energies on creating triple-A quality first-party titles, and supporting those third-party publishers that are creating triple-A titles for the Xbox console," he opened, excel. When we think about the future, and we think about what we're doing with XNA, that's us really backing ourselves to be at the forefront and continue the momentum from this generation, to put us into first place of the next generation," said McLean.

Even though it's something every console manufacturer aspires to, it's obvious that Microsoft deems hardware capabilities as a major factor in moving into a new generation.



Forza Motor Sport **is one of the upcoming Xbox games Microsoft considers a pillar title, and with** ***GT4*** **now delayed and no longer an online game, it's arriving at just the right time**



"We can never rest on our laurels, and gamer's expectations will continue to grow higher and higher all the time…"

"Another area was all-round innovation. Innovation, quite simply, is critical – we can never rest on our laurels, and gamers expectations will continue to grow higher and higher all the time. When you think about innovation in terms of hardware, content, online services such as Live and new peripheral devices, those things are important, and will continue to be important in the future."

"We're also learning a lot about how development costs are an important factor as to what makes it difficult for developers to produce innovative and great games. With this in mind we've created our next generation of development tools, being XNA, to provide the best opportunity to

"It's just not acceptable in this industry to rely on past technology, and the Xbox is the most powerful machine in the market, and no one can credibly argue against that. Certainly it's been one of the foundations of our success," declared McLean. Before moving to acknowledge that getting ahead in this industry is easier with friends.

"Creating a great ecosystem with your partners is also critical to success, and it has been another aspect of the learning experience that we've had in this business." he said.

Of course it's ultimately up to Microsoft to spot the areas that they need to attend to themselves. Content is vital, but it's the system manufacturers that really dictate how

people play. McLean offers insight into how Microsoft feels gaming has been changing, explaining, "I think gaming is now taking its natural place within the entertainment experience in the home, and it's changed somewhat now because gaming is now seen more and more as a collaborative experience rather than an individual one, and you can see that in terms of the way the Xbox console has been built."

Unsurprisingly, McLean was all too happy to go on and point to the console's relevent features, "Four ports so you can have four controllers at any one time. Xbox Live, so that people are not just playing with other gamers around the world, but they're also playing with their friends up the road."

With people are now using consoles for regular social events without actually getting together in person, **Edge** asked if the future of consoles may also genuinely extend way past gaming itself.

"I think so because as gaming becomes a more legitimate experiences, gaming is really positioned to enable people to enjoy those digital experiences in the home in an environment that they may want to," responded McLean, adding, "So if somebody wants to able to enjoy a web or broadband based experience whether that be video chat or MSN-style of technology online, the console market will be able to cater to that in the future. It's all about bringing entertainment to somebody on their terms and that's what Xbox Live is trying to do. It's trying to create those innovative experiences in the home.

Edge finished by asking whether or not the world has really been ready for all this innovation such as Live or not.

"There are a couple of tests for how successful Live has been. I think number one is purely the number of gamers actually online playing Xbox games. Also, the level of support we've had from publishers, like earlier on this year with EA coming on board," McLean concluded, "In Australia, unfortunately, the broadband penetration just isn't where it needs to be to move out of that sort of 'emerging technology' space. But as it does, I think you'll find Xbox and Xbox Live ready to benefit from that."

Edge is sure they will when such a time comes to pass. It's not like Microsoft doesn't have the financial resources to get everything right eventually.



Size does matter

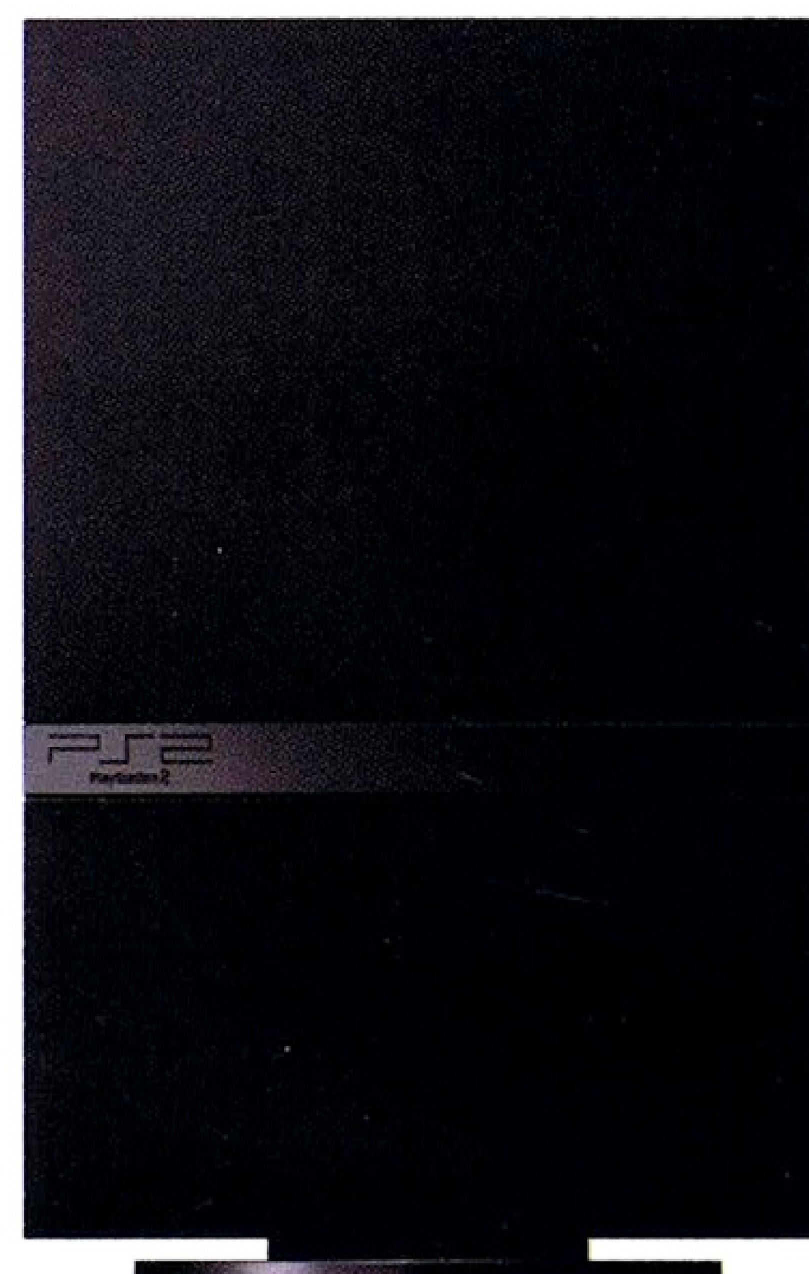
Sony give the PS2 the PSOne treatment to see out the system's twilight years

In 1999, many PlayStation owners thought little of the more diminutive PSone, but it was an extremely important move on Sony's part. This smaller, cheaper PlayStation helped Sony reach the final market the system could reach, eclipsing the milestone 100,000,000 units sold globally in May this year.

Right now, if any of the current generation of consoles were in need of some minaturisation it's the Xbox. Although **Edge** is certain the expression "Bigger is better" came from America, and that Japan is the champion of electronic minaturisation, so perhaps nationalistic tendencies have prevented Microsoft from seeing their system's incredible girth as a bad thing. Even if they have considered this, being unobtrusive obviously is not one of Microsoft's priorities, but Sony Computer Entertainment's little black box offers the market more for less compared to its predecessor. It's reason enough for the OS giants to watch and learn as Sony take moves to ensure that history repeats.



"We did it for PlayStation and now this time for PlayStation 2" SCEA's MD Michael Ephraim on the new PS2





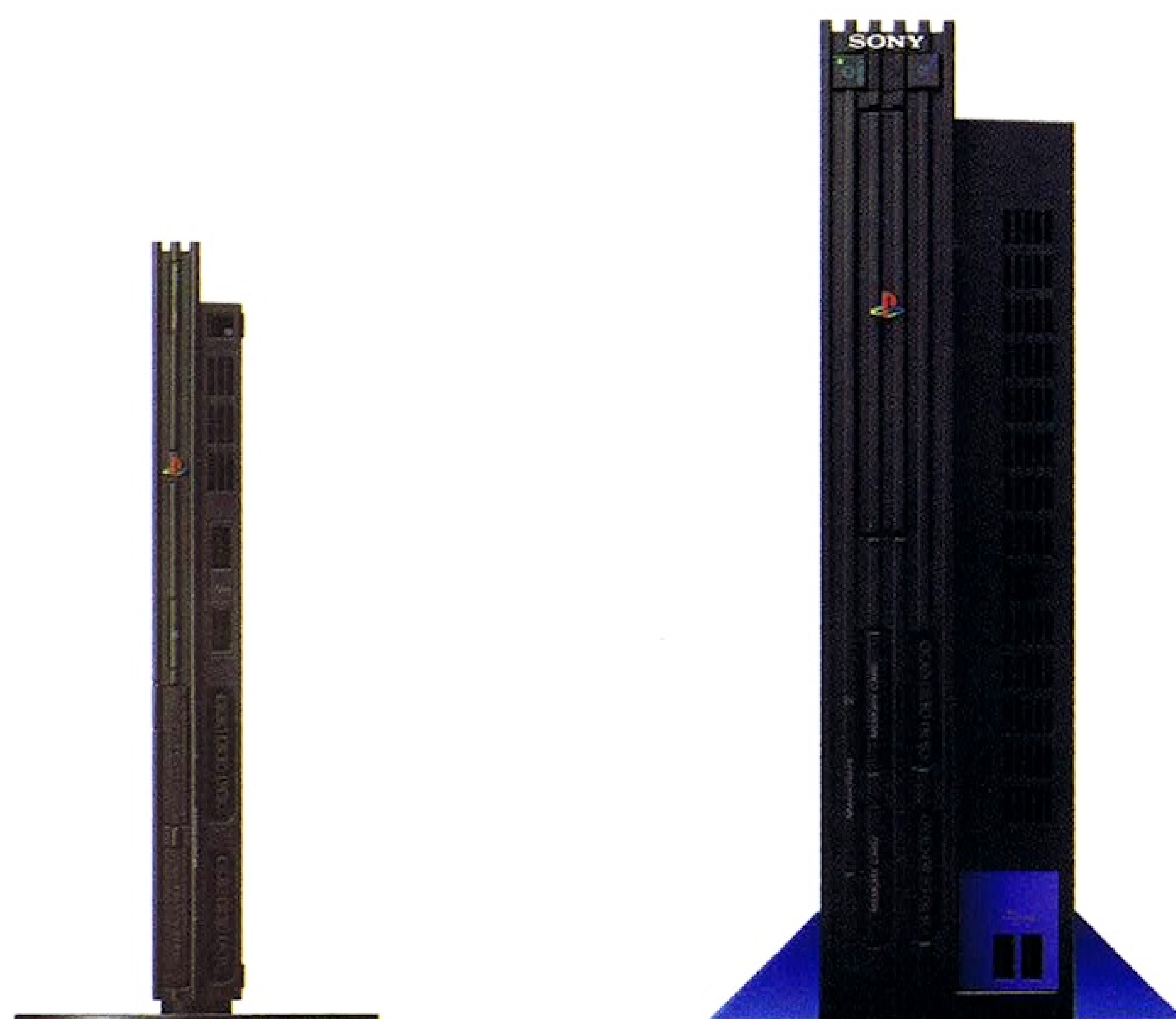
The new PS2 is not that much bigger than two Dual Shock 2 controllers, reminding us that it will be even easier to drag this lightweight console from a shelf than ever before.

Internal volume has been reduced by 75%, the weight has been halved, and thickness carved down from 7.8cm to 2.8 cm

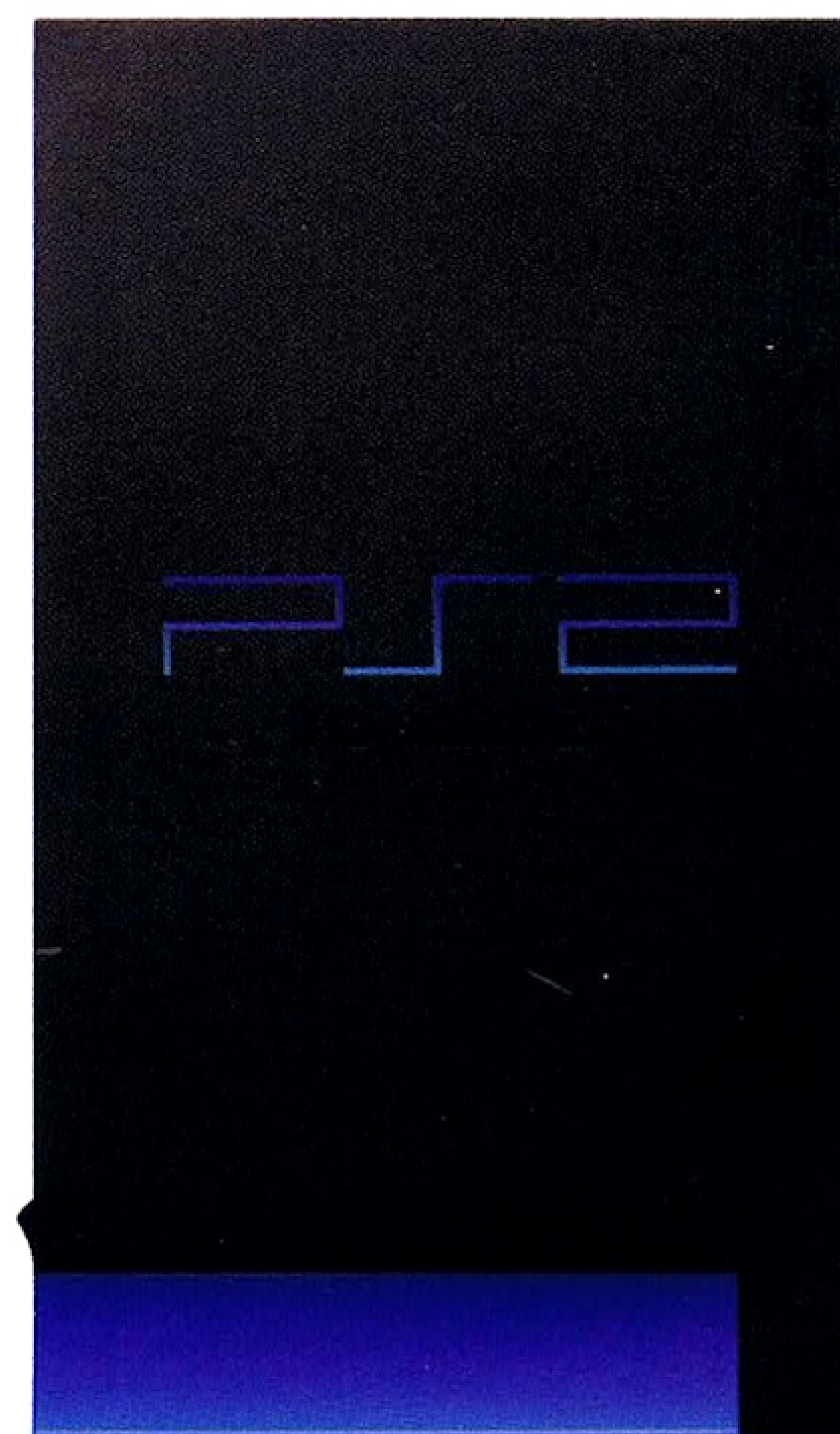
For Nintendo, this new, smaller PS2 will see the end of their claim on the most space efficient console, and thus portable console as well.

Relative to PSone, the new PS2 is a much greater example of minaturisation. The internal volume has been reduced by 75%, the weight has been halved, and the thickness has been carved from 7.8cm to 2.8cm. About the only thing SCEA didn't shave off is the price, although with the new PS2 launching on October 29, there's still time for Sony to go down that road should they wish to throw the proverbial spanner into Microsoft and Nintendo's Christmas plans. With the PSP well and truly in the forefront of the minds of most industry figures at present, this was a most opportunistic time for Sony to pull the new PS2 out of leftfield.

If Microsoft and Nintendo have done their homework, they should have seen this coming. The question that remains is whether or not they'll see the sense in Sony's plans and follow suit to minimise the damage they've caused.



An excellent perspective from which to compare the two versions of the PlayStation 2. The difference is significant enough to make carrying a PS2 around a much more viable option.



Aesthetics aside

The minaturisation of the PS2 has also addressed one of the system's issues that the public never really could swallow, namely, the need to embark on another spend to make the system network capable.

It's a genuine blow for the Xbox, which has enjoyed the luxury of being the only 'internet ready' console on the market since it launched three years ago.

The lack of an expansion port on the new PS2 serves as a sign that Sony has deemed the inclusion of a hard drive in a console system to be either too expensive, or not a strong enough point of sale to warrant its inclusion. USB ports keep external media devices as an option for the future, but 1.25 million PS2 units sold in Australia and less than 2% of them purchasing the network adapter, that'd be all the evidence Sony needs to know that expansion devices for consoles are a hard sell at best.

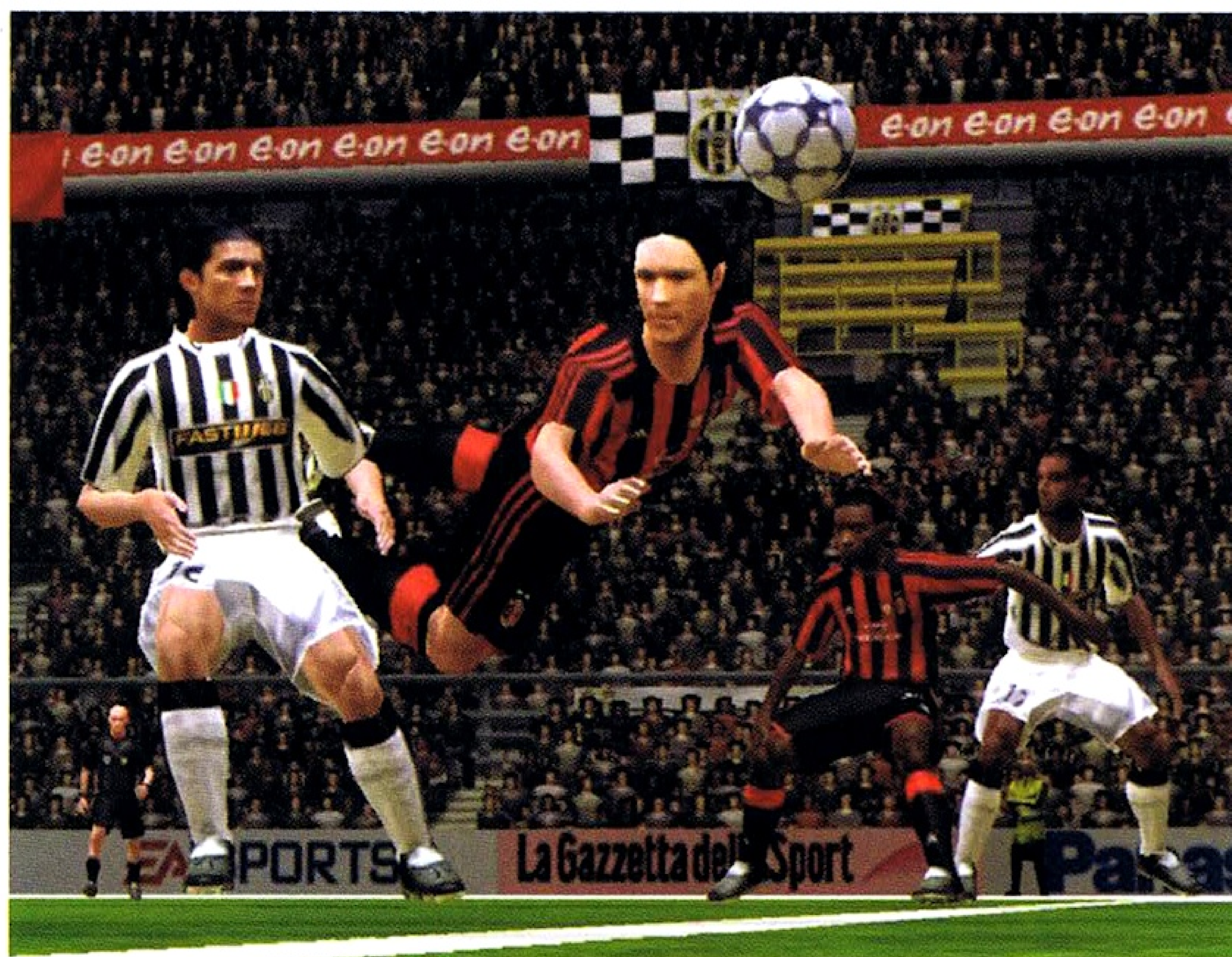
Kicking off the EA partnership with Live!

After snubbing Xbox Live! for so long, EA show their commitment to Microsoft's online platform by partnering in a global FIFA competition

EA's lack of support for Xbox Live all but drove Microsoft to create the XSN Sports franchise to realise claims of the sort content Xbox owners could expect to find online. Since EA's stance has done an about face earlier this year, XSN is now a chapter in Microsoft's past.

Now he US-based console manufacturers are now clearly thinking globally, partnering with EA and FIFA to launch the FIFA Interactive World Cup competition over Xbox Live.

Not only is the exposure gained by partnering with the governing body of the world's most popular sport an important association for Microsoft to establish, this particular competition is the company's first real attempt at running a global gaming



The competition will involve EA's *FIFA 2005*, with heats naturally taking place online, preliminary finals being held as offline events in six different continents, and the Grand Final in Zurich, this December. The Australian final will take place in Sydney on the 13th of November, but those interested in participating will need to head to www.FIFAinteractiveworldcup.com first.

Working with an organisation such as FIFA with over a century of running competitions will provide great assistance to Microsoft and EA in making the event a success, but a short time frame between the announcement and the finals stands to undermine the opportunity for the public to realise the event is on in time to do participate. With football's massive audience however, the relative lack of promotion for such an important event may ironically be what keeps it small enough to ensure that it all runs smoothly.

Even if Microsoft do manage to make a meal of this important test in Live's ability to cater for a competition of this scale, Microsoft's deal with FIFA to brand the Xbox as the oficial licensed videogame console of the 2006 World Cup will make any short term embarassments worthwhile. The World Cup draws the largest international audience of any event on the planet, including the Olympic Games.

CUTTINGS



Unlucky seven for Acclaim

After months of rumours, Acclaim has shut down all its studios and filed for bankruptcy. Rather than the predicted Chapter 11, a process which allows companies in financial trouble time to restructure, Acclaim has requested the more final Chapter 7 liquidation. This hands the company's assets over to trustees who will oversee their distribution to creditors.

The company's downfall has seen inevitable since GMAC Commercial Finance, its main lender, refused it a new credit deal earlier on this summer.

Staff at all the publisher's studios have been made redundant, totalling over 600 employees. The news comes, frustratingly, at a point when Acclaim's future line-up was looking more promising than it had in months. There's no news yet on the fate of *The Red Star* (above), but *Juiced* should be able to seek a new publisher and there are suggestions from certain ex-Acclaim folk that reckoned Take Two were the likely taker, although they've yet to confirm this.

Lucky three for Square Enix

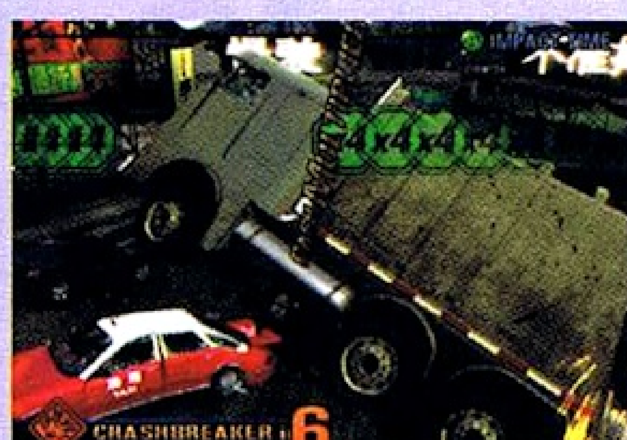
In a flurry of announcements, Square Enix has released news of three new games. The extraordinarily named *The Dirge Of Cerberus* is confirmation of the long-rumoured sequel to *Final Fantasy VII*. The company will also be remaking the SNES RPG *Romancing Saga* for the PS2. Lastly, as part of its rapidly growing online portfolio, first details have surfaced of a new MMORPG called *Fantasy Earth: The Ring of Dominion*.

Recently reviewed

A rundown of last issue's review scores

Title	Platform	Publisher	Developer	Score
Fable	Xbox	Microsoft	Lionhead	8
Doom 3	PC	Activision	id	7
The Sims 2	PC	Electronic Arts	Maxis	8
Second Sight	GC, PS2, Xbox	Codemasters	Free Radical	7
Burnout 3: Takedown	PS2, Xbox	Electronic Arts	Criterion Games	9
Front Mission 4	PS2	Square Enix	In-house	6
Richard Burns Rally	PC, PS2, Xbox	SCi	Warthog	7
Sudeki	PS2	Microsoft	Climax	6
The Chronicles of Riddick: Escape from Butcher Bay	Xbox	Vivendi Universal	Starbreeze	7
Spider-Man 2	PS2, Xbox, GC	Actrivision	Treyarch	6
Gradius V	PS2	Konami	Treasure	9
Pokemon: Fire Red, Leaf Green	GBA	Nintendo	In-house	8


Doom 3


Burnout 3


The Sims 2


Fable

Real 3D returns to agenda

www.sharp3d.com
www.kodak.com/go/3d
www.dur.ac.uk/inthreed

After a number of false starts, displays are finally taking practical steps into the third dimension



Despite the billions poured into research, bringing the third dimension properly to the computer monitor has yet to be anything like a success. Even in the world of gaming, experiments such as Nintendo's ill-fated Virtual Boy and less-well-publicised follies such as a 3D goggle version of *Black & White* haven't captured the imagination, let alone the shop shelves. But that doesn't mean the wider electronics industry has given up on the notion.

Sharp, in particular, continues to push the technology, releasing 3D screens for laptops, mobile phones and last month its first desktop flatscreen monitor, the snappily named LL-151-3D. The hope is that this new wave of devices will gain widespread acceptance because they can provide 3D images without the need for goggles or the other peripherals that have dogged previous attempts.

The trick behind this technology is the addition of what Sharp calls a parallax barrier. This ensures different patterns of light reach the viewer's left and right eyes – the same stereoscopic effect produced by the three-inch separation between left and right eyes in reality. The brain can then get to work, processing the two image streams together to create a single experience with 3D depth information.

There are some limitations with Sharp's technology, of course. The extra cost is around ten per cent, and although the screen's 3D abilities can be toggled, it increases the power consumption when on – an issue for laptops and mobile devices. There's also the problem of the sweetspot. To get the correct effect, viewers have to be strictly positioned straight on to the centre of the screen. But what can't be denied is the technology's potential. While Sharp is targetting hardcore niches such as medical imaging, mapping, data analysis and design applications, there's the expectation that game companies will be keen to explore the possibilities, too.

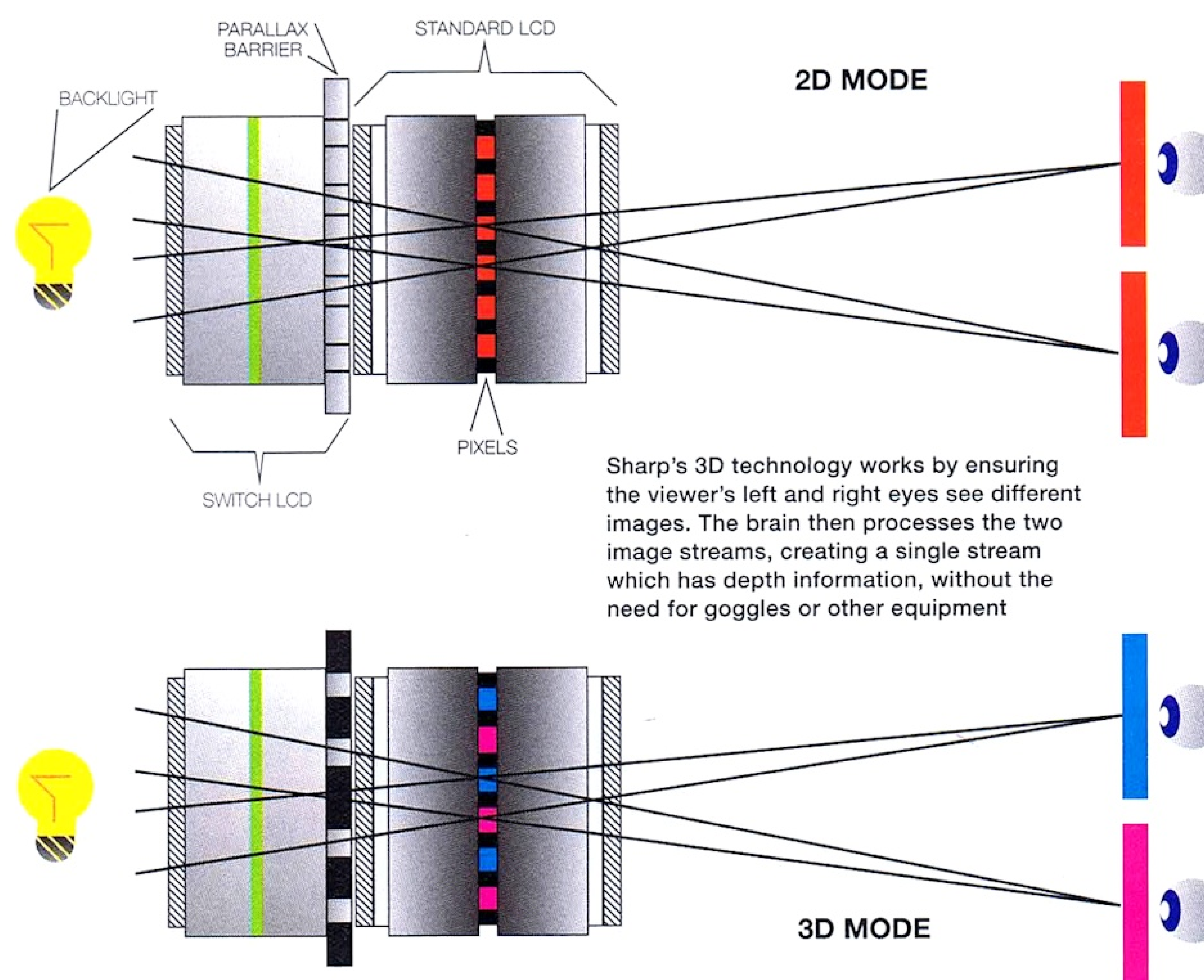
Another manufacturer looking specifically at such opportunities is Kodak, which launched a special edition of its 3D Stereo Display at the recent arcade-oriented iGames Expo held in New York. A dedicated unit, rather than a massmarket desktop item, the Kodak 3D Stereo Display uses a complex array of lenses and mirrors, plus two LCD panels, to create a high resolution (1,280x1,024) image with a wide 45°x36° field of view.

Unlike Sharp's technology, however, where applications have to be developed specifically to take advantage of the 3D screen's abilities, the Kodak display is compatible with standard PC games, so long as the PC is running a dual-display graphics card with appropriate drivers. At iGames, for example, *NASCAR Thunder 2004* and *Call Of Duty* were among the games demoed in full 3D using the system.





Many monitor manufacturers are pushing 3D-enabled screens. Having already produced laptop and mobile phone screens, Sharp has just released the LL-151-3D – its first desktop 3D monitor, while Kodak is also getting in on the act with its two-screen 3D Stereo Display



Sharp's 3D technology works by ensuring the viewer's left and right eyes see different images. The brain then processes the two image streams, creating a single stream which has depth information, without the need for goggles or other equipment

Creating the new vision

As with game consoles, so with 3D screens: it's software that sells hardware, and while plenty of 3D monitors are becoming available, the same can't be said for 3D-enabled content. And that's where inThreeD hopes to fill the gap. Based within the University of Durham's computer science department – and part funded by Codeworks, the region's digital investment agency – the company is working on a toolkit to enable content developers to create 3D applications. Heading up the project is **Nick Holliman**, himself a one-time Codemasters employee.

"There are very few tools available at present," he explains. "And it's quite hard to get 3D content to work well. Controlling depth of field is particularly important because you don't want to be moving the point of focus around too quickly, as that's the sort of thing which causes headaches."

Another big problem is a lack of standardisation with respect to screens. "While Sharp has one approach, other companies have different display technologies and we need to be able to handle them all," Holliman explains.

But despite these teething troubles, he remains enthusiastic about the future. "We don't walk around with a patch over our eyes saying: 'I'm only going to see in 2D today'," he points out. "It should be normal for us to see in 3D whether it's on our computer screens or not."

www.quazal.com

Making sense of online gaming

Quazal's lobby servicing toolkit Rendez-Vous is making it easier for publishers to carve out their own piece of online gaming real estate

It has always been tempting for technology companies to try to cross the boundary that separates them from content creators and publishers. Nvidia's current marketing strategy for PC games is one interesting example, while the early days of RenderWare triggered an internal debate about the value of getting licensees to add a logo to the back of the game box. But for most tech companies involvement in consumer affairs is considered a dangerous waste of time and resources.

That's certainly the case for Canadian networking specialist Quazal. Having quietly built its reputation with the console-based Net-Z and Eterna, a massively multiplayer networking toolkit, its latest release, the online lobby service Rendez-Vous, seems certain to keep the company in the shade, no matter how successful it is. And developer relations manager **Mike Drummelsmith** isn't concerned one bit.

"The whole point of Rendez-Vous is that publishers can use it to create their own online branding. It's not an area we want to get involved with," he explains.

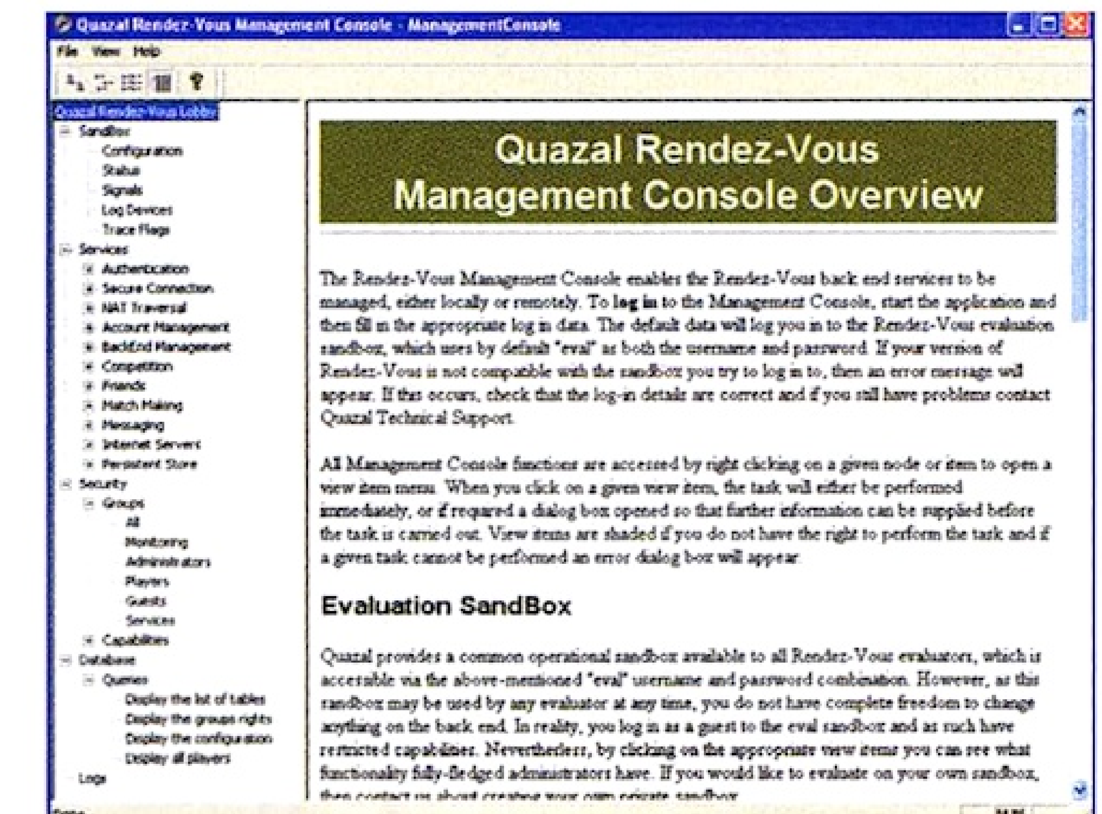
With connectivity now an integral part of console gaming's future, control and branding of the online infrastructure is becoming an increasingly important issue for publishers. As an example, it took EA over a year to hammer out an agreement with Microsoft over the way its games worked on Xbox Live. And, outside of Microsoft's proprietary system, publishers are thinking hard about how they can ensure a smooth online experience as well as retaining their audiences, particularly within their ongoing franchises.

Part of the solution is good cross-platform networking code, which can deal with the vagaries of the internet as well as reducing the cost of servers and bandwidth as much as possible. That's where Quazal's Net-Z, which can handle PlayStation2, GameCube and PC together, as well as Xbox, comes into play.

But more than this often-invisible technology, it's seemingly trivial services such as authentication, matchmaking, buddylists, account management and in-game messaging that are now being seen as key to a successful online game. And it's in this environment that Rendez-Vous' vanilla status becomes so attractive to publishers, particularly as its biggest lobby service competitor comes from GameSpy, which is itself a major consumer brand in the online gaming world.

"Everyone we spoke to either said they wanted an alternative, or simply thought that competition in this market would be healthy. I think it'll be pretty obvious that there's plenty of room for two providers," states Drummelsmith.

And the decision already seems to be paying off, with Eidos using both Net-Z and Rendez-Vous in four of its upcoming games, including *Backyard Wrestling 2* and *25 To Life*. Quazal is also in talks with a number of other publishers about licensing the technology.

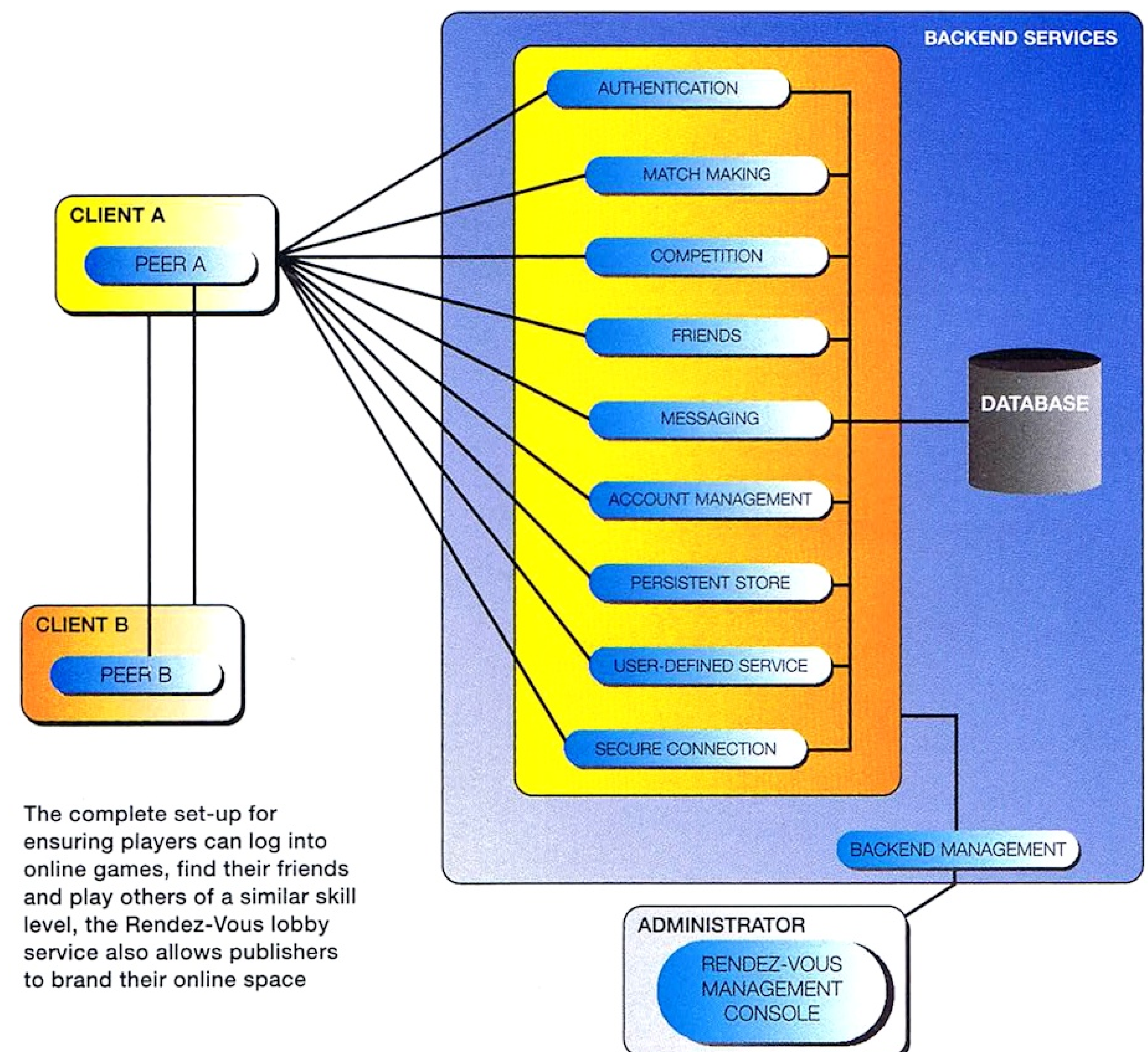


Rendez-Vous is available for GameCube, PC and PlayStation2 as well as Xbox, where it supports all the features of Xbox Live 3.0, making feature-matching across all platforms as straightforward as possible





The first publisher to sign up to use Quazal's Rendez-Vous lobby service is Eidos, which is using the product in four forthcoming games including *Backyard Wrestling 2* and *25 To Life*



The complete set-up for ensuring players can log into online games, find their friends and play others of a similar skill level, the Rendez-Vous lobby service also allows publishers to brand their online space

OUT THERE
REPORTAGE

01





One of the most quaint things we've seen in a while, this is a Flash game created with Tim Burton in mind





A lot easier in real life than on the screen, *Cyrkam Airtos* depends on your mouse control skills and a bit of luck

02





Let's be honest: your SNES sessions (using original kit, not emus, naturally) have been missing wireless pads

01 Flash: saviour of the coffee break

US/Europe: Out There's irregular Flash-game wonderland presents two interactive delights this month. *A Murder Of Scarecrows* is a scratchy, bleak, beautiful thing, polar opposite in aesthetics to orisinal.com but strikingly similar in old-school ethics. It's like a Game & Watch with fluid animation and real physics, drawn with a scribbly stylus by a talented goth, and it sits at www.theskeletonshop.com

Cyrkam Airtos, meanwhile, is located at www.sticky.tv/game/cyrkam_airtos and accurately simulates killing dead time in an office. Balls of rolled-up paper are fed from the background by a colleague; the player controls their character's jointed arm, which has to catch the paper and then toss it into a bin. The arc of the shot depends on the movement of your mouse and the time of release, which makes it rewarding if you've got a responsive controller, and frustratingly near to impossible if you haven't.

Our top score after a few attempts: 2,260. Eminently beatable.

02 Wires are so last century

US: "Messiah is uniting the gaming of the past with the technology of the future, bringing you the accessories of today." That's a pretty fancy way of saying, "Dude! We've just made some wireless SNES pads! And, holy crap, some NES ones, too! You can totally come buy them if you want, only $29.99 plus shipping for a pair of them in a super neat silver lunchbox, and you get a dog tag, too! Cool!"

In truth, they *are* pretty cool, although we can't see that much of a market for them beyond wirephobic Nintendo fanboys. Still, if you're one of them, go to www.playmessiah.com. You can buy Messiah trucker hats, too, although we're not sure whether that's past, present, or future chic, or simply not chic, ever, ever, ever at all. Hmm.

Soundbytes

"Oestrogen doesn't necessarily come into play in interface design, for example. With Playboy, I think I have an advantage, as a heterosexual woman, in that Playboy just wasn't part of my past. I was also able to equalise my interest between the pictorial side to Playboy as well as the editorial and journalistic integrity of the magazine."
Playboy: The Mansion designer Brenda Braithwaite talks to warcry.com.

"If Hiroshi Yamauchi phones me up, I will pick up at once."
Bill Gates awaits a very important phone call.

"It was tempting to take a stand and say that our products were never going to use any advanced Creative/3DLabs products because of their position on patenting gaming software algorithms, but that would only have hurt the users..."
John Carmack on the (now-resolved) spat id had with Creative.

03 Brain war

Sweden: We first covered *Mindball* a few years ago, after a brief encounter with the emerging sport in Amsterdam left the magazine reeling from laid-back defeat. We're much more Zen these days, of course, and now can prove it, thanks to the hardware's (slightly tardy) commercial release. The game's a little like a tug of war played with the brain. Players sit at either end of a table and try to 'push' a ball toward their opponent using mind power alone. Headsets sense how relaxed the user is, and applies force to the ball appropriately; stress out because you're losing and the loss is guaranteed. It's all about striking a balance between not caring and caring enough to not care, which is as curious as you might imagine. Details at www.mindball.se –
come and have a go if you think you're blissed enough.

04 Gaming grows up

Hong Kong: Everyone knows the internet has made it easier than every to get a girlfriend – why, what girl in her right mind would refuse you, particularly when you sent her that Photoshopped self-portrait jpeg of Brad Pitt's face on, uh, Brad Pitt's body? But wait: why go to all that effort when Artificial Life is offering a virtual girlfriend to download to your mobile phone? Pay attention, because this is genius: like a Tamagotchi for lonely adults with too much money, people pay Artificial Life to have the girlfriend on their phone, then pay again for gifts to keep her happy. Fail to buy her enough stuff and she'll start to sulk. Why, it's just like a real internet relationship, only without the possibility of a crushingly disappointing trip overseas at the end of it all.

See more at www.artificial-life.com

05 Food for thought

UK: Out There's gaming-does-good story of the month comes this time from Playerthree, a London-based game developer working on a videogame on behalf of the World Food Programme. Intended to educate children about the problems (and root causes) of world hunger, the story arc takes players to the heart of a drought in a fictional country torn apart by civil war. There, they participate in educational mini-games of varying genres; dropping food parcels in appropriate locations, perhaps, or managing resources in a *Sim City* style. It's unlikely that the Daily Telegraph, the Age or the Sydney Morning Herald will put this very positive gaming story one on their front page, but it's an interesting and noble cause, and will be available as a free download from www.wfp.org later in the year.

Data Stream If Word made games

Choice cuts from Microsoft's spellchecker, but what are they?

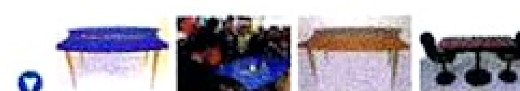
Frottage 2D shmup fun with underwear
Ninja Maiden Very hard but innocent bosses
World Of Aircraft Massively multiplayer flying
Bobtail A solar-powered cat
Vicarage More chaining, vicar?
Shame Ryo hides his face
Parapet The Rapper Fortified rhythm action
Gyrator Man Spinning to the music
Majorca's Mask Makes it look like Tenerife
Grandma An RPG for all the family
Metric Fusion Imperial prime?

03

Mindball

Mindball is an experience product, a game where two players control a ball with their brain waves. The player being most relaxed wins the game. The brain waves are detected by sensors attached to the headbands. The sensors (electrodes) are connected to a biosensor system. The biosensor system, registers the electrical activity in the brain – so called EEG. The brain waves increasing the chance to win Mindball are called Alpha- and Theta waves. They occur when we are calm and relaxed. The player's brain activity is shown in a diagram on the monitor. The player being most relaxed makes the ball roll over to the opponent's goal, with his brain waves as only aid, and thereby wins the game. The outcome of the game is seldom straightforward as the transition from calm to excitement and vice versa goes very quickly. Mindball is an exciting and audience friendly game where the audience can follow the game both by watching the ball on the table and the diagram on the monitor as well as watching the more or less relaxed faces of the players. The product Mindball originates

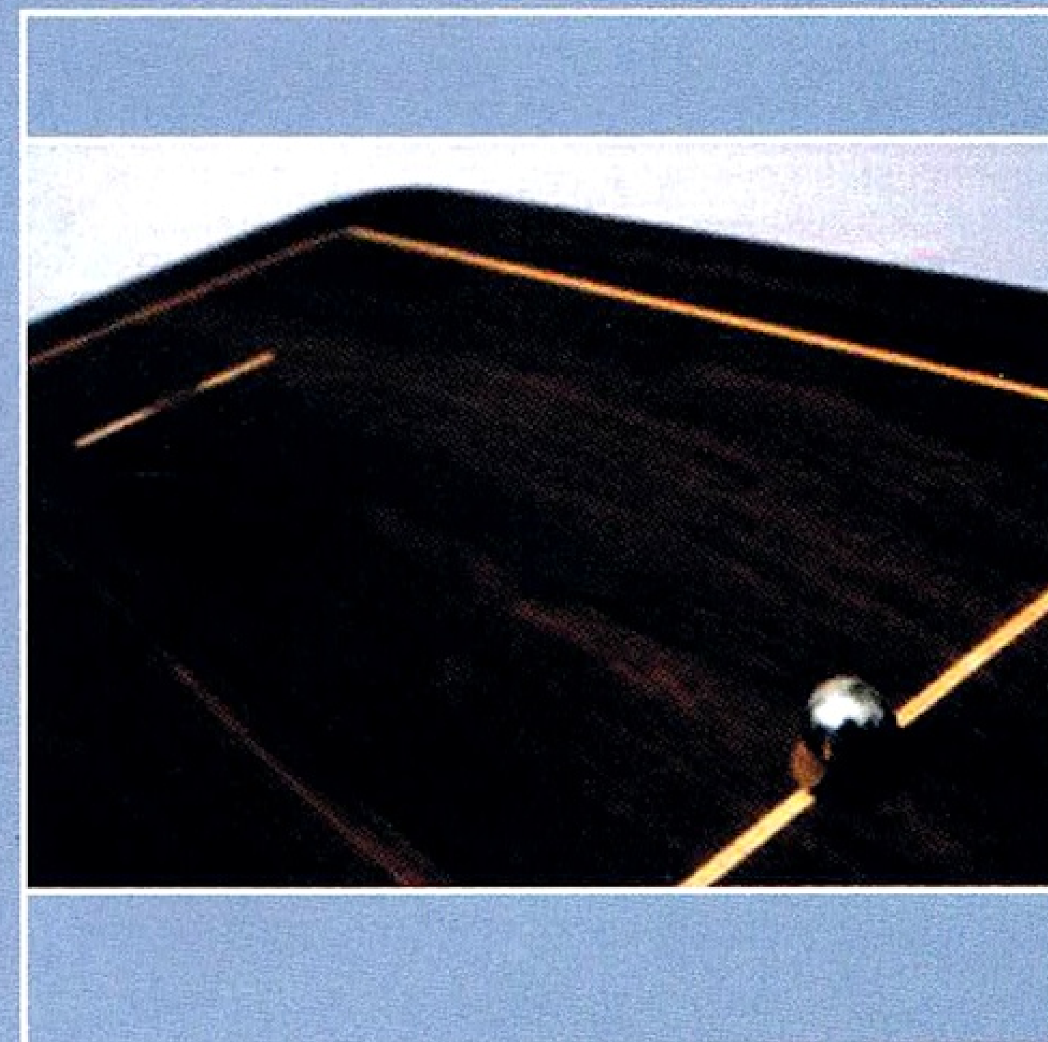




Of course, we remember when Mindball wasn't this popular; when it was just starting out, etc, and so on







04



If you've tried online dating and you still haven't been able to find a real mate, electronic alternatives are here



05



Learn about world hunger and how to tackle it with this game. Expect to see no tabloid newspaper coverage of it

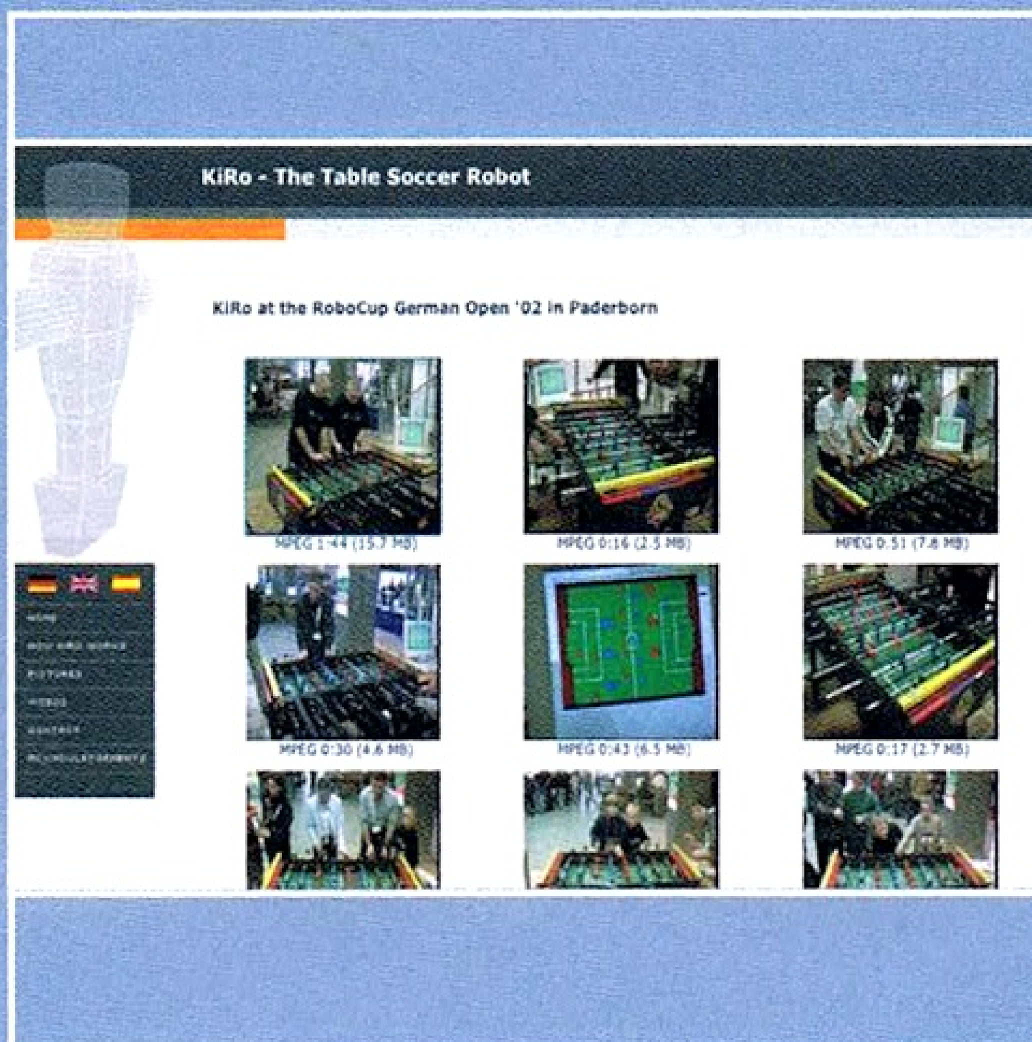


06



It sounds novel, but trying to deal with an interface like this is hard enough, let alone against a superior brain.

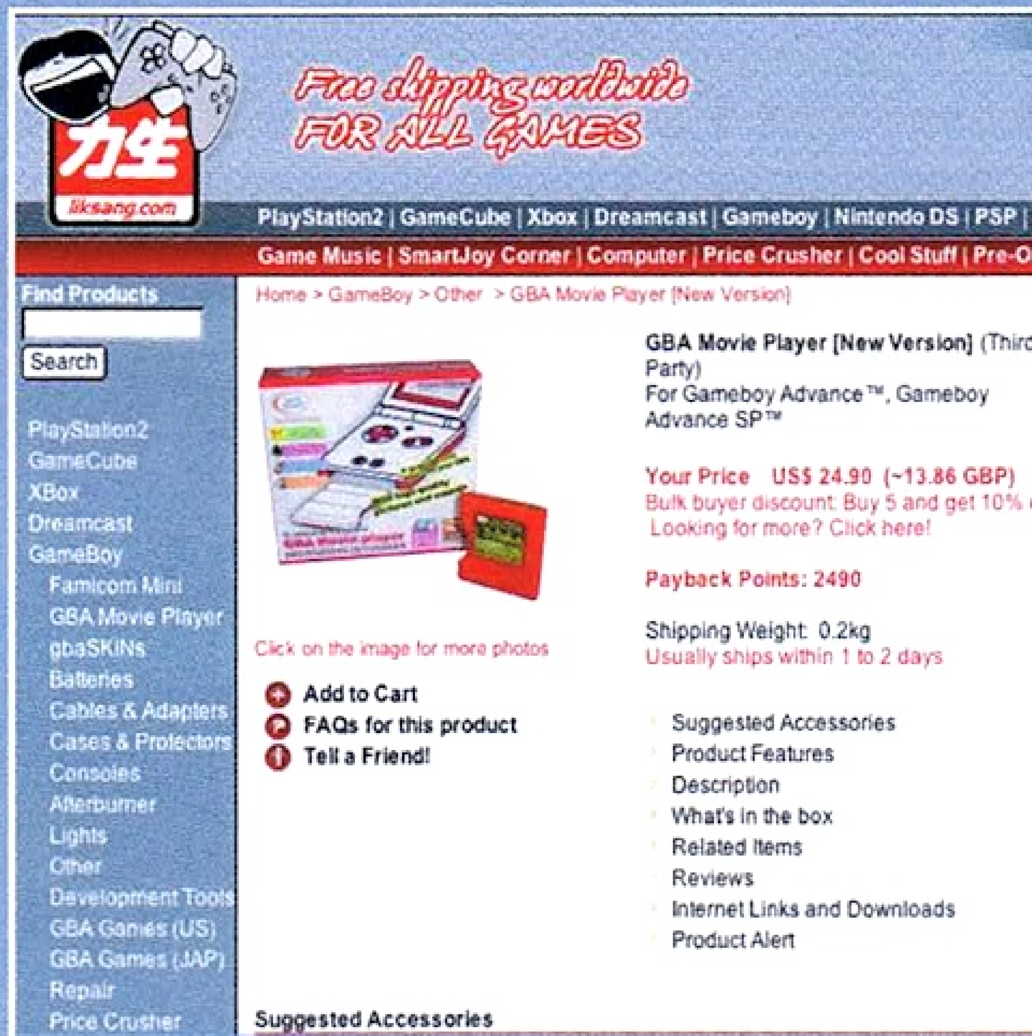




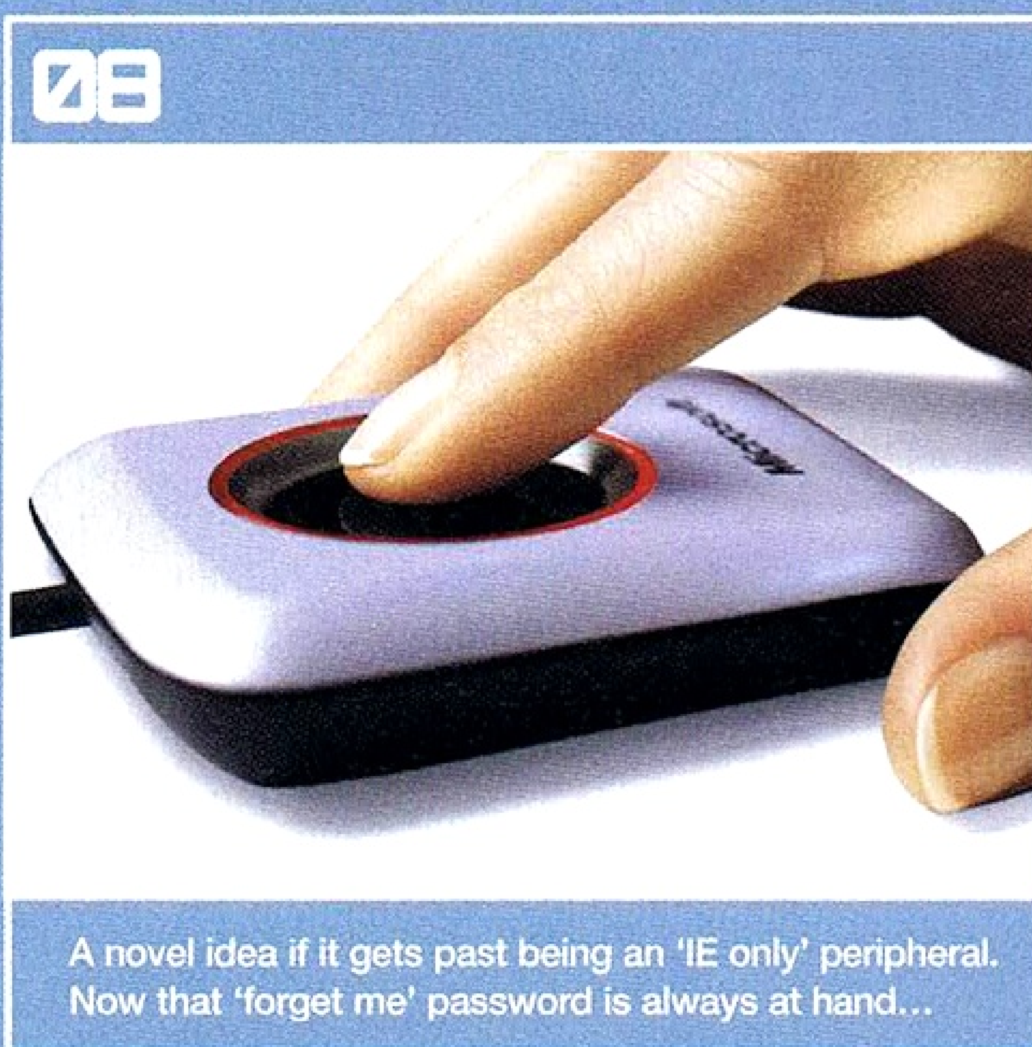
07



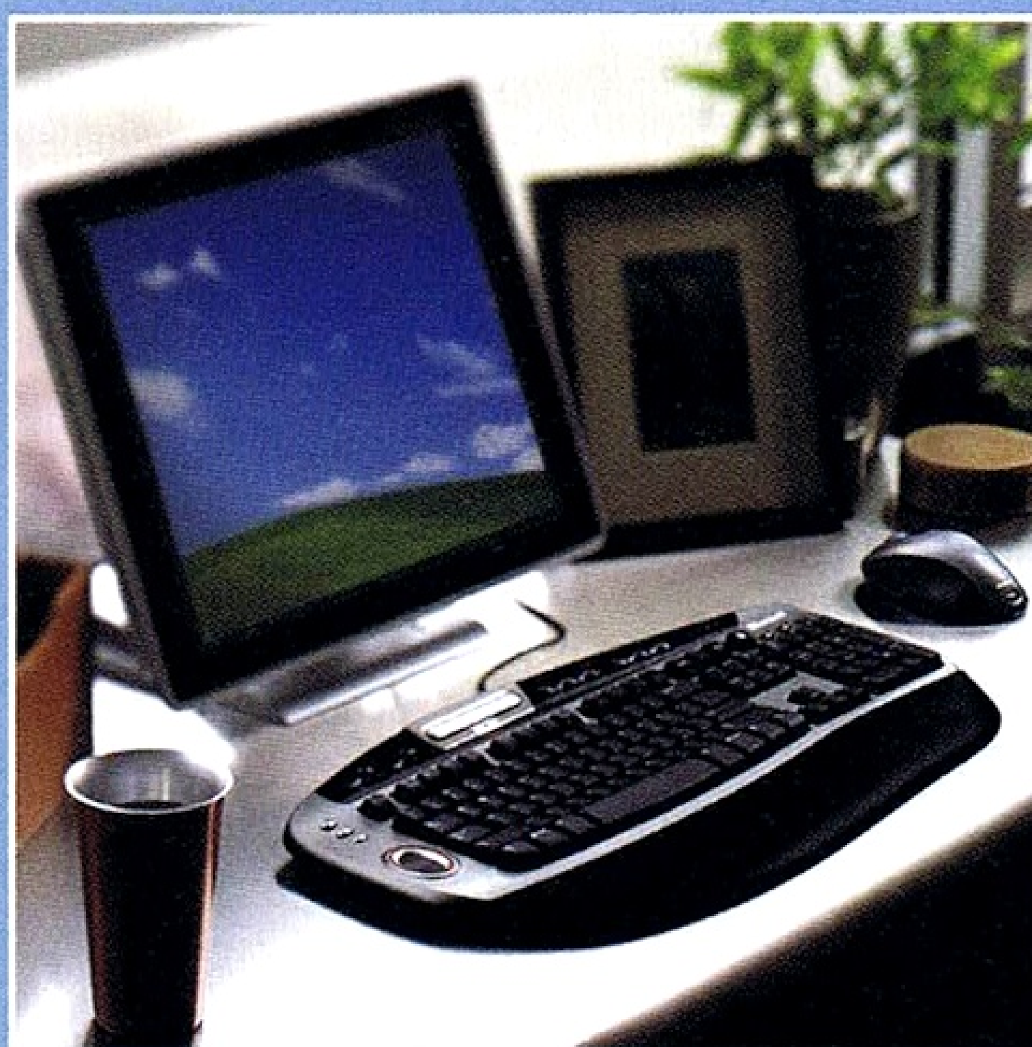
Movies and mp3s on a GBA? It'd be like having a PSP, only now. And with all the advantages of the GBA. Erm…



08



A novel idea if it gets past being an 'IE only' peripheral. Now that 'forget me' password is always at hand…



06 Kiro Kiro Kirorin

Germany: The problem with two player games is that they require friends, something that's often in short supply if you're a journalist working a handful of the hours the gods send to bring your readers bribe-laden exclusives. It's particularly a problem if you're as big a fan of table football as we are, so thank those benevolent gods for Kiro, a table soccer robot developed in Germany as part of research into the foundations of robotics and AI. Kiro plays a pretty mean game – you can see a video at www.informatik.uni-freiburg.de/~kiro/english/index.html – but then you'd kind of expect it to, what with it being a mean, uncaring robot that checks the game field 50 times a second with the sole intention of making you look bad in front of your friends. Not that friends are a problem if you have Kiro, because you don't need them. Hooray!

07 Media piracy is theft

Hong Kong: We have mentioned Xbox Media Center's life-changing capabilities before, but if there's one thing Microsoft's machine isn't capable of, it's portability. Sony's PSP, on the other hand, will be able to play movies on the go – but why wait, when you can order a GBA Movie Player today? The $30 (£17) device takes Compact Flash cards and delivers a range of multimedia playback options – movies, mp3s, ebooks, and, if you order from Lik-Sang, some unspecified 'homebrew emulation software' that's rumoured to be a NES emulator.

Visit www.lik-sang.com for more information, but remember, kids: use this device for the power of good.

08 On the Pulse

US: After years of Hollywood's contemporary clandestine cinema filler convincing us that bio-scanning devices are the cool identification standard of the future, the 'prototype' has finally become a reality, although its uses at present are limited.

The new Fingerprint Reader is a USB device that works as a physical trigger for the username and password auto-complete from Internet Explorer. Each login can be assigned to any of the ten digits, so a dubious character wanting in also needs to know which particular finger or thumb to use. Until Microsoft can expand the device's functions past IE site log-in details at the moment, and prove digital prints cannot be copied, it's a novelty.

Continue

Land of the Setting Sun?
Have decades of rigid stylisation dried out Japan's creative juices?
Exercise, Edge style
The third party *EyeToy* games start landing. Gaming journalists sweat.
Size matters
Sony shrink the PS2… Will it fit in the Xbox disc tray now?

Quit

Play's the Kiro like a zero
And we thought the off-the-ball play in *FIFA* required co-ordination
The Xbox Live! Litmus test
Live finally hosts a major international comp… Sink or swim?
Looking for love
Can a web-based AI cut it as your next love interest? You need help

09 Killing Monsters

First published in 2002, Killing Monsters is obviously not a new book. In the light of current controversy, however, it is a very apt one. With the subtitle Why Children Need Fantasy, Super Heroes And Make-Believe Violence, it's a firm response to the knee-jerk commentators who can only see in shades of black and blacker.

As Jones, a former comic book and screen writer turned MIT academic, points out, children and young adults are not blank slates, ready to be desensitised by whatever the culture presses upon them. Instead fantasies, including violent ones, are often a way for children to explore and confront their position in the big, wide world in an abstract and non-threatening way. Pointing your fingers, shouting 'bang, bang' then watching an adult wildly grab their chest and die can be empowering experience, not a reason to ban toy guns. The problem, he explains, is not that children are driven to emulate literally what they see in entertainment, but rather that adults are so concerned they often make the situation worse. The headline writers clearly come in for criticism on this point. For example, when a 2001 study reported that children's behaviour improved when they spent less time playing games and watching TV, the papers ran with 'aggressive tendencies in violent TV shows and games can be tempered if they cut back' – a myopic take on findings which hadn't distinguished between *Doom*, *Tetris*, Rugrats or WWE. His conclusion is simple: be involved in your children's lives, talk to them about what they're watching or playing, and don't believe the anti-hype.

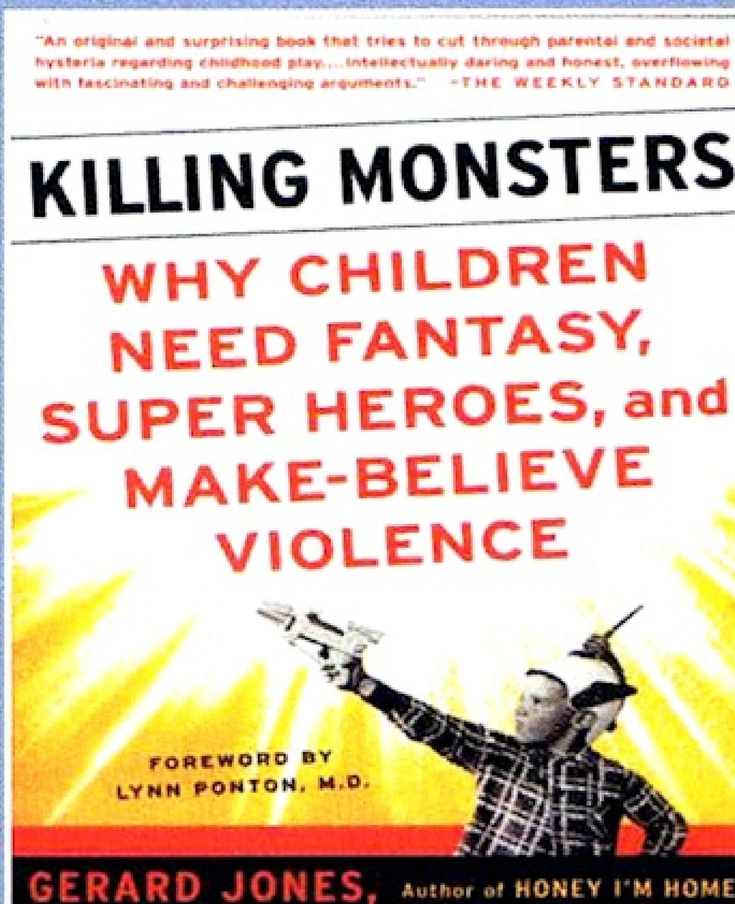
10 Time's Eye

With a background as a scientist and keen to tilt at the logical implications of futureshock, Stephen Baxter has often been compared to Arthur C Clarke, so it makes sense to slap the two together and see what they come up with. Time's Eye, the first of a promised collaborative series, deals with typical themes that have punctuated their work. The clue is in the title: time.

Starting with the concept that an alien culture has cobbled together a copy of Earth created by taking slices from various historical periods ranging from cavemen to astronauts, you certainly get the impression the authors are enjoying their work. While there's enough tongue-in-cheek pseudo-science to keep the hardcore happy, the real fun of the book is the jumbled juxtaposition of historical players. "Do you think it's a coincidence Alexander the Great and Ghenghis Khan, two of the most feared warriors, have both been brought together?" one character asks the other. And the more you think about it, the cleverer the idea behind the book becomes, the unexplained alien intelligence being the guiding pens of the two authors. You can almost hear them chortling down the phone line to each as they come up with another non-sequitur. 'How about throwing Rudyard Kipling into the mix?' 'Great idea, Arthur', and so on.

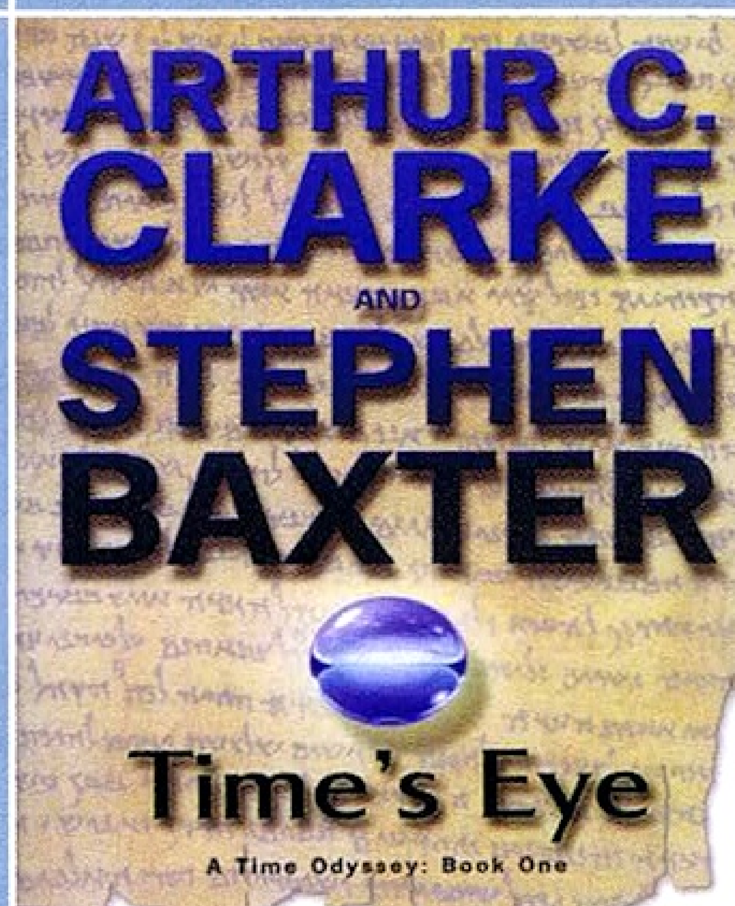
Of course, whether the Time Odyssey series can manage to keep up such delights in the long run is another matter. For the time being, it's off to a great start.

09



Author: Gerard Jones
Publisher: Basic Books
ISBN: 0 465 03696 1

10



Author: Arthur C Clarke & Stephen Baxter
Publisher: Gollancz
ISBN: 0 575 07530 9

11



Site: **I love bees**
URL: **www.ilovebees.com**

10 Website of the month

The most notable thing about the latest *Halo 2* trailer wasn't anything to do with the game itself. It was the way the www.xbox.com logo at the end momentarily glitched into www.ilovebees.com, setting investigative gamers off on a curious mystery tour, beginning with an online honey shop plagued by technical problems. Hidden messages in corrupted JPEGs imply the presence of at least one rogue AI, and while the storyline is still evolving at the time of writing, vague allusions to *Halo*'s universe make it seem certain this is some kind of precursor to November's main event. To join in the detective work and speculation, visit the ilovebees wiki, over at bees.netninja.com

12 Advertainment

Paper Mario 2, as it's known here, sees a plumber noted for his portliness reduced by one dimension. Losing his Z axis gives our hero all sorts of new powers, however, so he doesn't seem to mind – as this Japanese advert demonstrates…



It's a GameCube game, obviously, and OH MY GOD, Mario is ENORMOUS. Those planes should look out



Mario, now on a sheet of paper, begins to fold up. A sharp crease through a sensitive area is the first



Even folded, Mario still manages to dwarf the 747s. He heads off down the runway to take to the skies…



…and lands in the game. Either he's shrunk from his earlier titanic proportions, or the game's huge, too



The stylised look of 2D characters in a 3D world is shown off to good effect by legions of familiar faces



Just what we needed to defeat Bowser – a horde of Bobomb paratroopers. He still looks pretty fierce, mind



A voiceover announces: "The mysterious adventure of *Paper Mario*" and the theme tune dinkles its thing

Just past the railway tunnel, around the corner from the dentist's surgery, before you hit the harbour and down the road from Science Girl's house; just beyond the boundaries of logic but before we reach the impossible; just the other side of a shot of whisky; just sober, just; that's where you'll find Johnny Casino's House Of Games.

Ah, Johnny Casino. Variously: smart, stoic, scurrilous, smoking in the shadows with glorious cheekbones. Specifically: a journalist of some note some time ago, a word sniper for hire, loquacious on paper but evasive in person, always punctual and always deadly. Casino retired from professional games journalism after a sub editor left his prose mortally wounded. A man of pride, RedEye's hero writes for himself and himself alone, punching out thousands of words of game theory on his busted-up typewriter, then incinerating it in his garden. They say that on glorious summer evenings, when the grass is fresh cut, the air smells of burned meat and the bugs make love on the hot asphalt, you can squint to the west and see Casino's thoughts going up in smoke, a giant insult to the games industry written against the sunset.

They're right, actually. That's how Casino does his advertising. Smoke signals. To RedEye's knowledge it has only ever worked on one person, and that was RedEye. When a blackened scrap of paper landed on RedEye's window sill, he knew to whom it belonged.

So that's how RedEye knows Casino's still writing, and what he wouldn't give to read some of those words. It seemed inevitable that he was destined for greater things. When Casino quit the journalism game, the first thing RedEye asked him was what he was going to do next. First came silence – Casino excels in the kind of pause that carves a question mark on your spine – and then the answer. "Johnny Casino… is going to write something important." The unspoken assumption on RedEye's part was that Casino was going to write the great unAmerican novel. In fact, the laconic lothario actually meant a letter to his bank manager.

Hence Johnny Casino's House Of Games, a small, elegantly decorated boutique on the edge of town that's financially supported by love, honour and creative accounting. The House Of Games sells videogames, but is like no other institution in the country, insomuch as it is neither soullessly generic nor striving to attain individuality by developing an atmosphere and aroma akin to a 15-year-old boy's bedroom. Johnny Casino's House Of Games is defined by the House Rules, the only work of Casino's meant for public consumption – read instruction – for many years, an abridged version of which is reprinted for your edifice and education here.

Rule one: No shoes, no shirt, no service. If you are a tracksuited chav with no manners or style, a teenage girl with hoop earrings bigger than your head or a shifty heroin addict who smells of dog, then it is assumed you will either try to steal from Johnny Casino or pay with money earned by stealing from people Johnny Casino loves. Johnny Casino will not have thieves in his store, unless you count himself, Stealing The Hearts Of Beautiful Russian Spies.

Rule two: No sell-out. Johnny Casino's floorspace belongs to one person, and that's Johnny Casino. Promotional stands clutter and confuse. Shelves will hold one copy of each game, never more, never less. There will be no pre-ordering, nor will Johnny Casino's beautiful staff ever answer the phone with a sales pitch. Game pods – one of each – will play the best pre-release software, not the most heavily marketed. A bar will sell alcohol to customers of age, and alcohol-free whisky-flavoured Slush Puppies to those in training.

Rule three: Beautiful staff, beautiful shop. If you want purchasing advice, ask the good-looking cowboy at the bar. Anything else, and Johnny Casino's House Of Games' beautiful sales reps will be happy to not-mislead you. They know nothing about games, but they are experts in the deadly art of being helpful and polite. They will not try to foist this week's special sell-through into your pasty, sweaty hands in pursuit of a bonus. They will answer factual questions with factual truths, take your money with a smile, and look damn fine.

Rule four: Organise appropriately. Games that are similar go next to each other. This isn't pigeonholing, just a different way of thinking. Eye-level shelves (the top shelves, because anything above that is stretching, and stretching ain't cool unless you're stretching for the hand of a hot girl who's falling into a hotter volcano) have the best games according to intelligent critical opinion, the opinion of Johnny Casino and his close friends, then standards fall to the floor. The 'shoot things a lot' section contains single copies of *Halo* and *Ikaruga* at the top, and a small, elegantly scripted card says if you like the latter, you might want to check out *Viewtiful Joe*.

Rule five: Johnny Casino's House Of Games does not play advertorial over the in-store sound system. It plays jazz. The in-store televisions do not show lavish trailers. They show jazz. There is fine air conditioning, and every hour the most sweet-smelling assistant breezes round the store, filling it with an unthreatening aroma.



REDEYE

A sideways look at the videogame industry

Smoke signals

A journalist of some note some time ago, a word sniper, loquacious on paper but evasive in person, always punctual and always deadly

Rule six: Do Not Ask For A Loyalty Card As A Slap In The Face Often Offends.

Casino's idyll is a lesson to us all, but most specifically to current dealers of our electronic fix. While many features are unworkable in a modern world, it is time to look at another way of selling games. RedEye's friend decided to get back into games, but, pressured into buying a PS2 and *MOH: Rising Sun*, backed out again. *EyeToy* and *PES3* changed his mind, but RedEye isn't a game doctor, prescribing to the needy. He's not asking for a bar in every store – not yet – but Casino's paradise is clear, pleasant and informative. That'd be a start, wouldn't it?

RedEye is a veteran videogame journalist. His views do not necessarily coincide with ***Edge****'s. Email: whoisredeye@gmail.com*

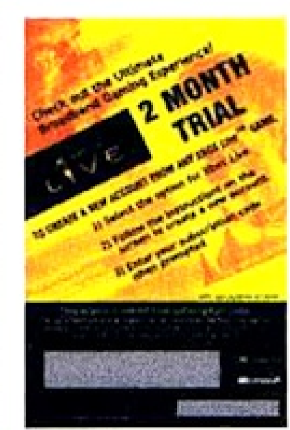




SEGA
www.sega.co.uk

Welcome to the open road





Xbox Live Trial Card with Every Game

Trial *Xbox Live* with OutRun2 for no extra charge and race up to 8 players from around the globe.

Available Now

SEGA PRESENTS

OutRun2™

The beautiful journey

"Beautiful, fast and online...The sequel we've waited a lifetime for." 9/10 Xbox Gamer





9/10 XBM

ONLY ON XBOX

Ferrari
Official Licensed Product



SUMO DIGITAL







Running with an established franchise may not sound like rocket-science, however part of what makes the process reasonably straight forward for most developers is that they're expanding on material that they created themselves.

With that in mind, **Edge** called Irrational Software, the Canberra based outfit that has picked up the *Tribes* series - a series with a decidedly hardcore audience. Michael Johnstone, Senior Designer on *Tribes Vengeance* fielded the call.

Knowing a rather picky audience awaited Irrational's work on the series, we asked Michael what it was like running with someone else's baton like they did. He responded,

"As you can expect, it wasn't easy. Irrational are familiar with first-person games, but with the Australian team their experience lay with that and make the game more accessible to people that have never played *Tribes*. It was an ambitious philosophy to start off with, but that's how it was and we stuck with it through to the end of the project."

Easy to see as the ideal scenario, but how should a developer approach this problem? Johnstone highlighted the role the communities play in this case.

"Having established communities is both a blessing and a danger. It's a blessing in that they at least *think* they know what they want. At the same time, they don't necessarily know for sure. I guess our task is to then look at what they think they want and what they communicate to us, and try to distill that - break it down and really figure out how to implement the game in such a way that we give them what they want but not necessarily in the way they thought that might cause them to not have fun with the game. An example of that would be the jet-packing physics. In the previous *Tribes* games, the physics were fun – that's what the game was all about. However they were built in such a way that new players couldn't get from A to B in the way that was most intuitive to them. It's okay to a certain extent that the game challenges you in certain ways, that's what we want, but you don't want someone to feel so frustrated that they throw the game away."

Naturally, performance matters to PC gamers, which raises the issue of the technical challenges that Irrational faced. Was adopting a new engine a headache or a boon?

"It was a bit of both," answered Johnstone, continuing, "We definitely had to do a lot of work to optimize the *Unreal* engine's terrain rendering. An example of the limitations that we had to deal



LOCAL CALL

A phone call to the Australian development scene

Irrational Software on taking over a gaming franchise

Freedom Force, a strategy game. Not only is this a FPS game, but a FPS game with two established franchises, two established communities, and in a lot of cases, two very different communities."

So with multiple opinions, what's the bottom line here? Johnstone draws it for us, stating,

"The philosophy was, 'look at *Tribes* and discover what it's really about'. In short - 'What is the core of the game?' The core of the game, when you dig into it, is really about the freedom of movement – So we latched on to that catch-phrase 'freedom of movement' and built everything on top of that." summised Johstone before continuing,

"One example in *Tribes Vengeance* would be the grappler. It's completely new, but it was consistent with this 'freedom of movement' core that we'd established earlier on," offered Johnstone, before addressing the balancing act required to pull this project off. He continued,

"More generally, as the development continued the philosophy that we had in mind was to maintain a certain high-end challenge to the game. We wanted to keep Tribes a fairly skilled game that attracts a competitive audience, people who like to play the game for years – while at the same time trying to balance they wanted."

Johnstone was quick to highlight the idea behind that, explaining,

"That sounds a bit fishy, but it's really the job of designers, it's what we do. We look at what people are requesting and figure out how to incorporate that into a game and make it work."

We wanted to keep *Tribes* a fairly skilled game that attracts a competitive audience, people who like to play for years...

When asked how difficult that was with *Vengeance*, Johnstone paid tribute to their most discerning critics, relating,

"I have to say though that in some cases the community would request things that we could just do outright because they were great ideas - and why not? If it's a great idea and it works with our design and philosophy, let's do it."

Of course, a developer can hardly rely upon this audience to explain why others didn't appreciate the series to date. Apparently Irrational were able to be self sufficient due to their own backgrounds. Johnstone elaborated,

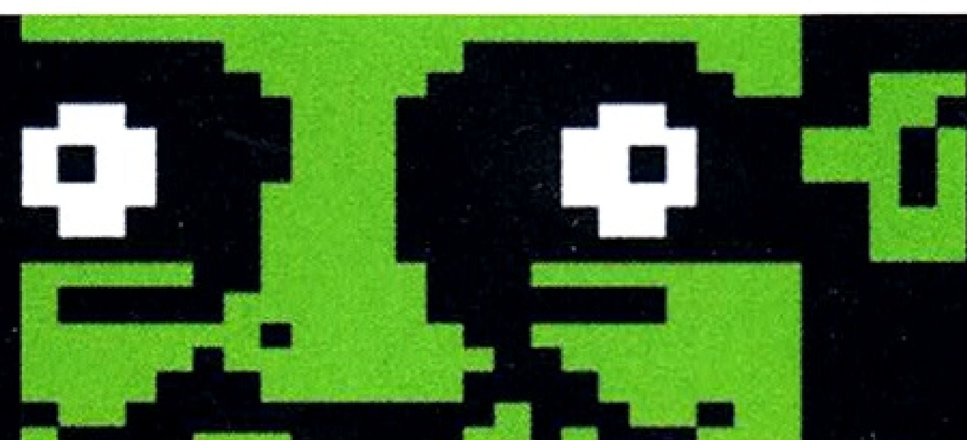
"Since we had people in the office who were quite new to *Tribes* and when they play the game we can watch them and straight away see what problems they encounter, and what with that were unfortunate was that the *Unreal* engine doesn't support tiling terrains. In previous Tribes games that height field would repeat on all sides so it would appear that you'd have an endless landscape to play across."

Was there a perfect solutiton to the problem? Johnstone was frank about Irrational's efforts, admitting,

"We did manage to get that working visually so when you travel to the edge of map in Tribes *Vengeance* it appears to reach the horizon – you can't see the edge of the terrain. Unfortunately what didn't get into the game was a physically repeating terrain, so you can't actually travel outside of a map."

With *Tribes Vengeance* having recently 'Gone gold', whether or not these sorts of changes will agree with the established community, or the audience that *Tribes* never had will soon be clear. 

Local Call is a just that, a call to a local developer. If you have comments on this article, send them to Email: edge@derwenthoward.com.au



BIFFOVISION

Page 26, press hold, and reveal. Digitiser's founder speaks out

Trampling on bad design

Don't judge a book by its cover, they say. But it's a stupid saying. If you see a book with a picture of a naked tramp on the front called Pictures Of Naked Tramps Vol 3, and it bears a sticker reading 'You will see lots of pictures of naked tramps – stripped, washed and shaved for your pleasure – in this book', then the chances are you know what you're going to get.

Admittedly, that isn't always the case with a games machine. I mean, who could suspect the evil which lurks at the heart of the average, harmless-looking personal computer? To all intents and purposes, consumer electronics are designed to evoke a sense of their purpose and who they target. Nintendo clearly believes consoles are toys, which is probably why it made the GameCube resemble a block of Lego, while Sony and Microsoft make no bones about the fact they're targeting as wide an audience as possible with their consoles – but the trendsetters first and foremost. Nevertheless, you have to wonder why all three don't spend a bit more time and money on the aesthetics of their hardware.

Though I'm fortunate enough to own more than one games machine, the downside is there simply isn't room to have them all beneath the TV. At least, not unless I wish to have a length of flaming bamboo inserted daily between my grumbly cushions by the lady of the house. So, aside from my PC, I can only have one games machine on show at a time. And, I have to confess, it's the PlayStation2 which has worn the biggest hole in front of my telly. Absurdly, this has nothing to do with the games. Yes, we all know that the GameCube boasts the sort of games that proper, devout gamers like to play. And yes, the Xbox also has plenty of games worth shouting about. But the ghastly truth of the matter is that the GameCube and the Xbox absolutely suck as far as the look of them goes.

The former has a ridiculous joypad – too many buttons, and a stupid layout – while the latter is just horrible in every sense. And you can chuck the sodding Game Boy Advance SP in there too; I've not played on that in yonks, because it's so nasty. Couldn't they have just stuck a frontlight on the far more pleasing original GBA? The SP has a comfort level equivalent to riding in a car with square wheels over a pebble beach while sitting on a special pouffe made out of cacti and being force-fed a list of similes. By a naked tramp.

Upon its unveiling, the PS2 was heralded as a revolutionary piece of design. Oh, how the press releases cooed over it. Slimline, subtle and evoking the spirit of 2001: A Space Odyssey, we were told again and again. At the time I hated it. To me it looked far too much like a piece of serious computer hardware rather than a home entertainment device or – let's be honest – a toy.

But despite that, while still thinking the PS2 is one of the most insipid-looking consoles ever – the original PlayStation, Mega Drive and Super Nintendo are all far nicer to look at – it's so bland as to be inoffensive. You don't notice it sitting there in the living room. You can tuck it between the armchair and the TV unit, and people will mostly mistake it for the shadow of a book. Perhaps even Pictures Of Naked Tramps Vol 4.

Not like the Xbox, which until recently I hadn't played on for almost six months. I shelved it in a fit of pique after wasting $99 on the dreadful *Knights Of The Old Republic* (if this was a Star Wars film it would be called Re-turd Of The Jobbie). Only recently did I dust it off for the impressive *Full Spectrum Warrior*. In those interim six months there were a number of exclusives I never played, simply because I knew it would mean having to get the Xbox out and plugged in, and the end bit of the controllers found (why do they come off? WHY?!). I'd have to suffer the annoying, fiddly black and white buttons, and the equally irritating rounded coloured ones. It's just too much trouble.

Heck, even though I knew *Red Dead Revolver* would probably look better on the Xbox than the PS2 I still went for the latter version because I didn't want to look at the Xbox, or touch the Xbox, or have the ugly thing staring back at me. You wouldn't want a hideous, fat crone glaring at you from the corner of the living room. You'd put a bag over her head, or make her wait in the bedroom.

Aside from the fact that the Xbox is larger than the average family saloon car, it's just a sucky, uninspired piece of design that's as unpleasant to hold as it is to observe. You can imagine they sat around in the meeting, the designers throwing out wild ideas, before some sappy exec piped up: "Oh, just make it a big black box… and put some sort of X on the top. Nothing too fancy."

One needs only look at the iPod, or any of Apple's range of computers, or take a trip around Carphone Warehouse, to realise that Nintendo, Microsoft and even Sony have a heck of a long way to go before their systems can compete with other consumer electronics design.

The PSP looks like a step in the right direction, but there's still a whiff of the '90s about it – especially when we're told that the official version will lose the sexy, flat controls in favour of raised buttons. It comes across like an anorexic blend of Lynx and Game Gear. But if the PSP looks dull, the Nintendo DS looks positively stinkmongous. It's functional and nothing more, and if Albert Speer had designed handhelds he would've conceived the DS. Nintendo should make *Luigi's Bunker*, or *ExciteReich DS,* for its launch.

Perhaps you shouldn't even be aware a console is there. Either have it blend in with your other below-telly boxes, or make a feature of it

In the same way ugly people wish we could love them for their personality, I simply can't bring myself to love consoles just for their games. I don't like what the Xbox looks like, or how the GC pad feels, so I tend to favour games on PS2. I don't even like what the PS2 looks like, but needs must. Heck, I buy more PC games than anything, chiefly because it's in a cupboard and my mouse and keyboard are wireless. Perhaps that's the solution: perhaps you shouldn't even be aware a console is there. Either have it blend in with your other below-telly boxes, or make a feature of it. Either way, if the next generation of hardware doesn't tease my sense of cosmetics, I'll have to entertain myself in another way. Naked tramp photography, anyone?

Mr Biffo is a semi-retired videogame journalist. His views do not necessarily coincide with **Edge***'s*

Edge's most wanted

Genji
The difficult first solo title from Yoshiki *Street Fighter II* Okamoto's Game Republic, we're hoping this action title has the moves to match its gold-tinted looks.



(PS2) Sony

KOTOR2: The Sith Lords
Fable's (a)morality plays have us longing to feel the weight of planet-crushing, light-extinguishing consequence behind our foolishly selfish actions.



(PC, Xbox) LucasArts

Lego Star Wars
It's not an equation that needs explaining, but if Star Wars and Lego are on one side of the equals sign, then light-headed, all-consuming need is on the other.



(PC, PS2, Xbox) Eidos

Oddworld Stranger
Little hints dropped by Lorne Lanning at EGN have whetted already ravenous appetites even further for a trip to what he's called 'Oddworld's Nicaragua'.



(PS2, Xbox) Electronic Arts

The point of difference

Why so much of what we see looks familar

Perhaps it's a little harsh to pick on the *GTA* series, which has clearly its own style over the years, but anyone reading a gaming magazine these days is subject to a phenomenon which faces any entertainment industry that's completing the transition to purist artform to mass market mind-candy.

So to get back to picking on *GTA: San Andreas* (we're sure Rockstar will manage to fight back the tears on the way to the bank), for all the new West Coast gangster icons and isms radiating from each *San Andreas* screenshot like heavily polished bling-bling, is there any mistaking these image for something other than a *GTA* game?

Of course not, but it's not because Rockstar are lazy or out of ideas, it's because the masses aren't diligently thumbing through pages like these, meaning the developer will probably have to rely on a single screenshot to catch the attention of a lazy eye that doesn't linger by its nature. Sticking to a visual style purely for that reason may sound like a major artistic sacrifice to make, but try telling Rockstar that they should do anything at all that may make *San Andreas* look and feel different when they stand to make a fortune if they intentionally stick to the old formula.

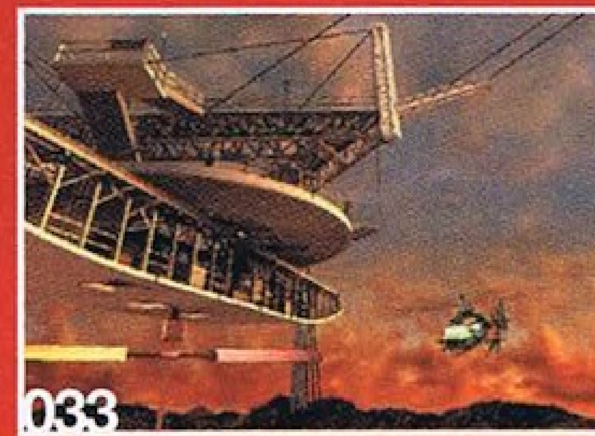
That's an obvious example, everyone knows *GTA*, and the merits of brand recognition in that case are elementary. However, now have a think about how some gameplay elements are established furniture in certain gaming genres.

For example; The W-A-S-D key configuration is default on 99% of first person shooters on PC, every RPG having HP and AC in the mix somewhere and 2D fighting games revolve around chain-combos and float launchers.

Not one of those points sounds particularly important or impressive on its own, but consider the reaction of a fan to having something familiar absent while playing the kind of game that feels like 'home'. If someone rearranged your home while you were at work, it wouldn't feel right when you found it heavily changed. Games are just the same, and as much as those of us who pride themselves on being discerning can revel in our relative enlightenment, understand now that such purist rants will fall on deaf ears, just like that beret-wearing, skivii-clad art-house resident you know keeps telling you to stop enjoying B-grade sci-fi for art's sake.













Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas

It's one small step towards release and one giant leap for mannequin-kind as GTA treads a stream of fashion consciousness



Diet, exercise and lifestyle now play a part in shaping *San Andreas'* lead character CJ. Quite whether the fickle '90s fashions will be able to keep up with an expanding waistline is unknown



If this were any other game, such a straight-laced drip-feed of details would be likely to cause little other than apathy. How many cars? How many levels? How many guns? Such details are normally confined to fact sheets, and count for little more than fleshing out a game's abstract. But then the past two *GTA*s have been created in such a way that those details and numbers are what kept people playing for several dozen more hours than the story did.



Much like *Halo*, *Vice City*'s form and function have seeped so deeply into the mindset of gamers that all it takes is a morsel or two of detail to get the appetite going, alive with the possibilities that such specifics bring. And it seems that Rockstar has chosen to hand the player of *San Andreas* the kind of avatar customisation and twiddling that's rarely seen outside of online gatherings or 'create-a…' modes in sports games.

In fashion-conscious urban gang culture, your colours say just as much about you as who you're hovering a target reticule over

The appearance of lead character CJ isn't just an aesthetic choice, however; in the fashion-conscious circles of urban gang culture, your colours say just as much about you as who you're hovering a target reticule over. As the opening missions are completed, CJ starts to garner respect from his gang, the Orange Grove Families, and can up his esteem within the group by kitting himself out with the right apparel. Conversely, rival gangs and the police will be able to spot CJ far more quickly. Clothes shops are dotted around San Andreas, from the functional bargains of Binco to the more expensive, brand-led chic of SubUrban. Certain missions require certain get-ups, with the player no longer guided to a suitable, spoon-fed icon as in *Vice City*.



Whereas Vice was a city of neon and funky nightlife, San Andreas' look seems to be one of lazy sunsets and palm-lined suburbs

Barbers' shops are also present, with your hairstyle mooted to command respect or derision from pedestrians as well as rivals. It's not so much freedom as a strategic choice, but one that can be tailored to make your movements through the game world as seamless or thorny as you wish.

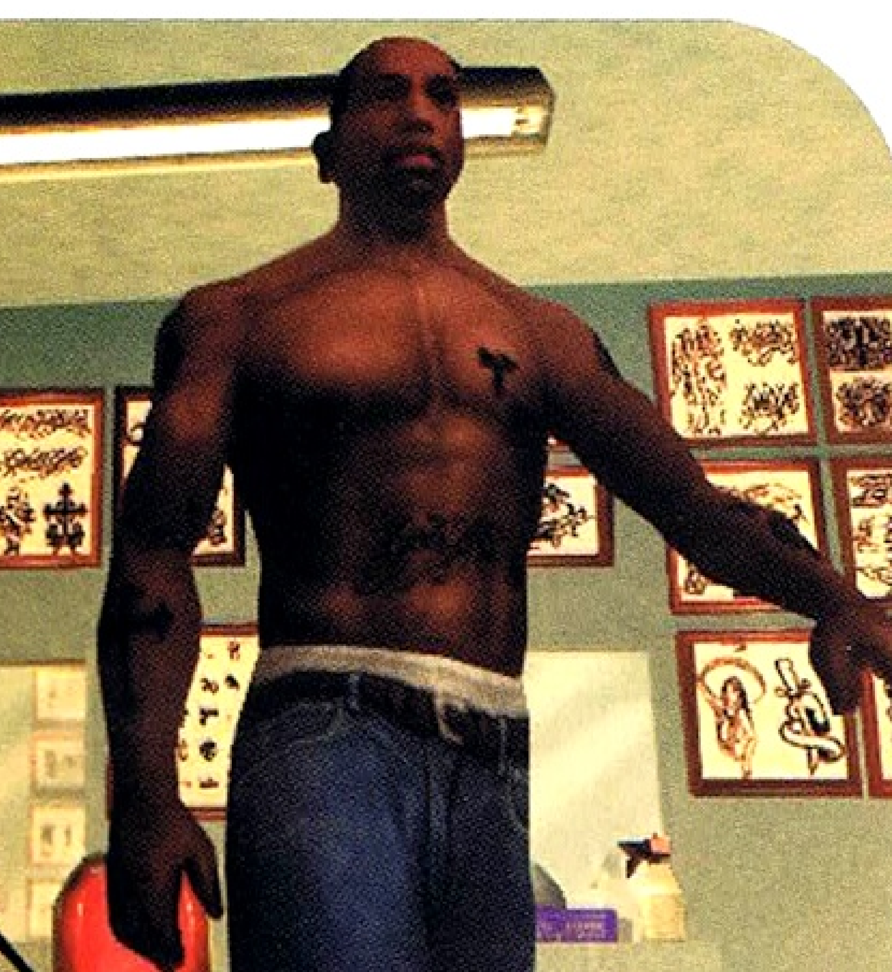
Rockstar has been keen to point out the vagaries of burglary, too, an option which is to become a necessarily reliable source of cash; CJ's role in this *GTA* is no longer that of a glorified goon for hire, and so financial rewards for progressing through the game aren't guaranteed. Whereas *Vice City* featured just a handful of stores to be held up with a gun and a few seconds of posturing, a robbery in *San Andreas* needs planning, the right outfit and a getaway van. Wearing a balaclava or ski mask puts CJ into sneak mode, useful since ransacking someone's home can only be performed during the night. Plundered items will have to be fenced, and the classier areas will provide more valuable fodder for organised thieves. Just how rife the opportunities for this Grand Theft Manual will be are unclear, but it seems to feature the kind of scope that raise it above a mere subgame.

It seems that *San Andreas'* theme of play is as much about expansion as progression. As well as the myriad city locations and outlets detailed so far, there are those that show the state's sprawling countryside, promising the kind of offroad expanse that

Format: PlayStation2
Publisher: Rockstar
Developer: Rockstar North
Origin: US
Release: November 11









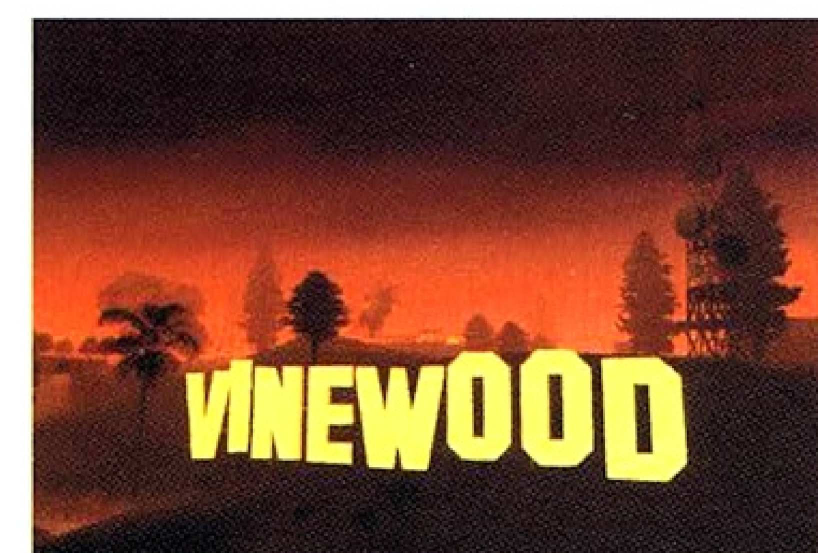
As well as barbers and tailors, CJ can visit tattoo parlours to sculpt his appearance and – as circumstances dictate – blend in or stand out



It's not just the car that makes a man in San Andreas, but the 'do. And the threads. And the tatts. Appearance is customisable on many levels







This is *San Andreas*' riff on Hollywood. The big question is: what do you get in return for pulling a wheelie through the 'D'?

once formed the playground for entire games (Rockstar's own *Smuggler's Run*, for example). The scope becomes all the more dizzying once you realise that these are the areas *in between* the cityscapes where the bulk of *GTA*'s gangster pantomime plays out.

An RPG's worth of depth is being injected into *San Andreas*. If it can be implemented as smoothly, capably and gracefully as the series has managed with the geekier elements of gaming – of rewarding experimentation and exploration, of burgeoning collection-based side quests – then gamers maybe shouldn't start to get excited, they should instead start getting worried for how deeply the *San Andreas* bug may bite.





Mercenaries

Format: PS2, Xbox
Publisher: LucasArts
Developer: Pandemic Studios
Origin: US
Release: February 2005

The first tiny cracks appear in Pandemic's status as Most Exciting Game Developer In The World





Vehicles can be commandeered, and forces loyal to factions which feel favourably towards you will fight on your side. Unless you start shooting them

It was one of the best pitches of E3, no question. The idea of running riot in a war-torn North Korea, balancing the ambitions of the Chinese army and the Russian Mafia against the concerns of your own morality and the limitations of your bank balance, was almost irresistible.

For now, what Pandemic has to show is an inevitable letdown. Months of development remain, but the game as it stands lacks the spark of its premise. Although a tiny gauge in the corner demonstrates the warmth of your relationships with each of the rival factions, there doesn't seem to be much evidence of unrivalled freedom or free-wheeling tactics in the activities you undertake. Gunning, running and attaching explosives to cabins seem to work pretty much the same whether you're doing it for love of money or love of country. The only flash of character is the ability to log in to your Russian Mafia arms account and order up a couple of missiles mid-battle – for instantaneous delivery. It's a pleasingly preposterous system, but it will be interesting to see how it impacts on game balance.

As things stand, *Mercenaries* seems like a game with a big mouth and rather ordinary trousers. We look forward to being proved wrong.







The choice of three main characters, including the requisite shapely lady, should add a greater sense of variety and personality to the story

Crash 'n' Burn

Format: PS2, Xbox
Publisher: Eidos
Developer: Climax
Origin: UK
Release: November

Climax gears up to deliver a spine-jangling racer whose smash-happy action makes for some shattering spills

Maybe it's just the preview code jitters, but *Crash 'n' Burn*'s looks are, to begin with, worryingly basic. It's only when things start moving, and cars starts to prise each other apart, that the functional environments and vehicle models begin to make sense.

With a guaranteed 16 cars on the track (even during online sessions with just two players), it's obvious that *Crash 'n' Burn*'s preoccupation is with petrol-fuelled automotive suicide above all else. Ramps and mischievous banks are sprinkled around the tracks in the most deliberately inconvenient places, encouraging vehicles to noisily dismantle one another at speed. And that initially primitive vibe seems to be the facilitator for plenty of destructive detail – ruined cars leave slicks of oil that can be ignited by a spark, adding walls of flame to the list of obstacles to be avoided.

One of the more maniacal race modes is the excellent Kamikaze, which sees eight cars racing around the track in one direction, with the remaining eight going in the other, in what must be one of the least-insurable events in the modern racing arena. So, despite maybe not sporting the gleaming chassis of *Burnout 3* or the glossily smeared paint job of *Need For Speed Underground*, *Crash 'n' Burn* seems to be expertly geared for throwaway destruction.







The bland vehicles seem skeletal next to those of modern arcade racers like *Burnout 3*, but that anatomical description seems apt considering the fractures and amputations the vehicles suffer





Control is suitably loose and instant for a game where the preferred driving line is whichever one stops you from exploding or falling to pieces

GoldenEye: Rogue Agent

Format: GC, PS2, Xbox
Publisher: EA
Developer: In-house (EALA)
Origin: US
Release: November

That's Ar Oh Gee You Eee, not Ar Oh You Gee Eee. Has the industry learned nothing from Rouge Leader's blushes?

In a perfect world, picking the internet's most commonly misspelled word for its tag line would be *GoldenEye*'s biggest problem. A sequel to one of the most saintly games ever made, its new publisher needed to tread carefully around a brand that many gamers feel they can more claim ownership of than EA. Unfortunately, in an effort to invigorate the game's design, the company may have trampled over its brilliance.

Rogue Agent's hook is that you don't play Bond. You play a renegade MI6 agent, swept up in a war between Goldfinger and Dr No. Having lost your eye in the fight, you now have a golden replacement, which brings with it super powers (along with, presumably, very complicated insurance requirements). The game remains in the firstperson, and its other big innovation is that you carry twin weapons.

It's around this point that doubts begin to surface. You have free choice of the weapons you combine, except for any large ordinance which requires two hands. However, from the initial levels we've played, it was hard to gauge how much difference this made from simply being able to carry two weapons and swap between them – the system seems to add neither a tactical edge nor a visceral thrill to the gunplay. Dispatching enemies seems to be a simple equation of filling them with enough lead so that they fall over: bullets seem to count for as little in the game as they do in the films.

Your golden eye will have four powers, but so far only two have been revealed. The first is a magnetic shield, which – coupled with the game's recharging health system – means that what most often kills you is simply your own lack of patience.

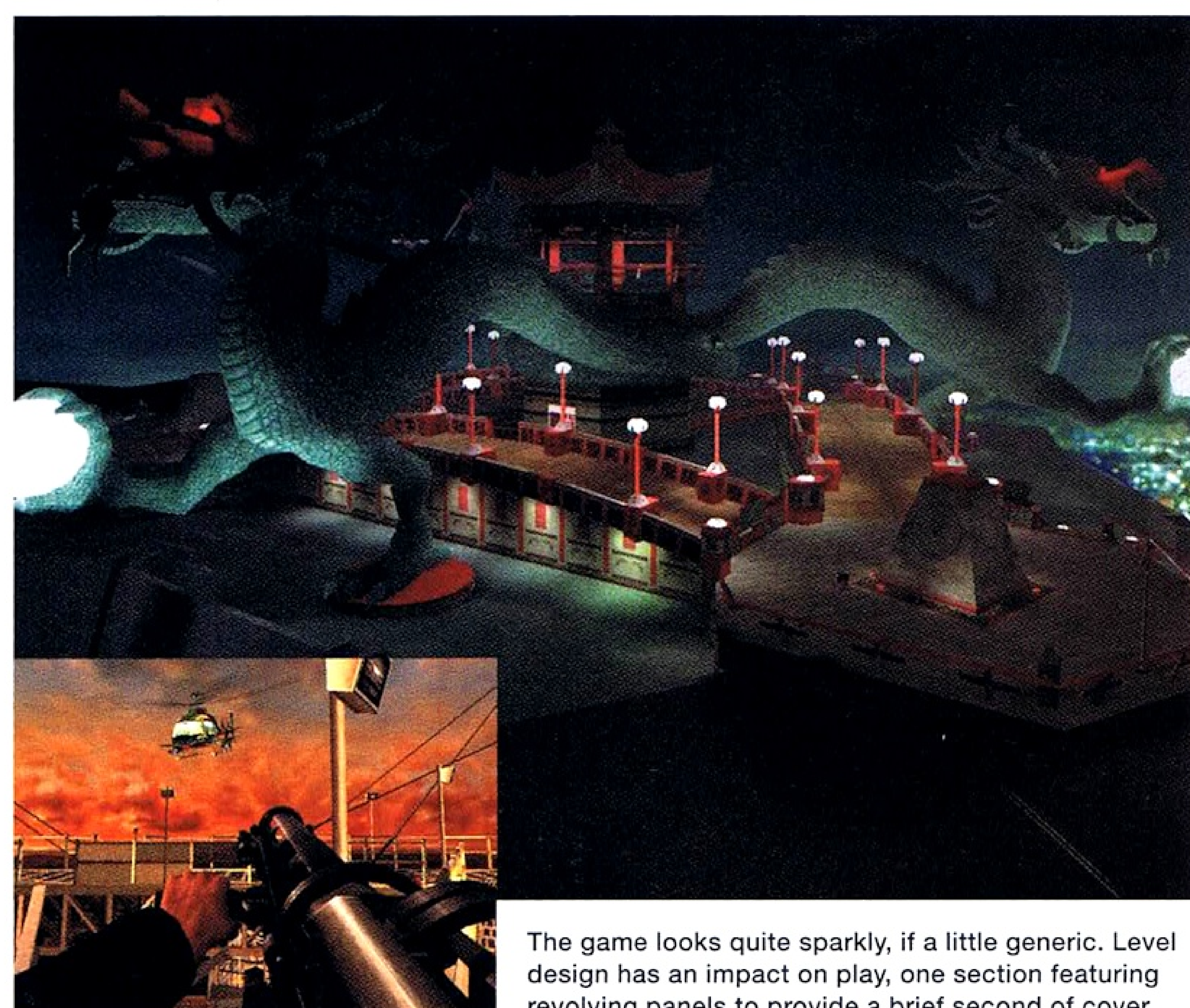
The second is this season's essential accessory, the telekinetic grab. This allows you to hoist opponents into the air and fling them to their deaths, but is much more poorly implemented than in games where it forms a core component of the gameplay. Eye powers have a limited use, and must be powered up by performing 'good' kills and headshots before you can use them again.

The most telling aspect of the game is perhaps its placeholder HUD. Scheduled to be completely redesigned before release, right now it's one of the clumsiest and most ill considered we've ever seen – all flash and no function. The game may yet prove to be a perfectly good FPS, but there seems little chance of deserving the name it inherits. *Rouge Agent* it is, then.









The game looks quite sparkly, if a little generic. Level design has an impact on play, one section featuring revolving panels to provide a brief second of cover

Under The Skin

Format: PlayStation2
Publisher: Capcom
Developer: In-house (Production studio 4)
Origin: Japan
Release: Out now (Japan), November (PAL)

Capcom puts away the swords, the pistols and the virus, and wheels out the slapstick

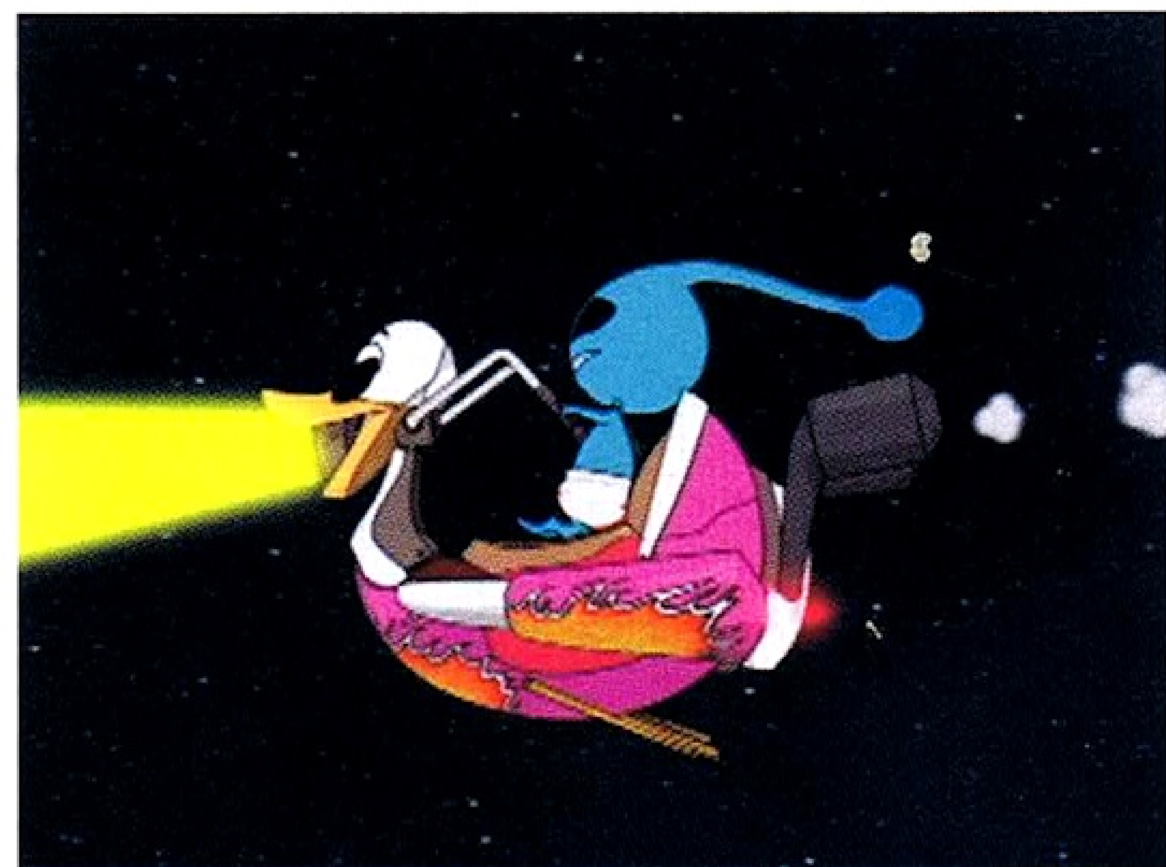














One of the levels is set in a magnificently cute iteration of Raccoon City, where the ghastly Nemesis himself has to be pranked to the point of dropping all of his coins. No mean feat, especially with the T-Virus munching its way through your inventory

Under The Skin's plot is taken straight from the bottom-left-hand corner of an episode of Today Tonight: "My three-year-old son's causing chaos in a nearby galaxy!" It's maybe a fitting comparison for a game consisting of cartoon violence and social mischief.

Alien Kozumi has just turned three. As is the traditional rite of passage for all inhabitants of the Meiwaku star system, he must travel to a neighbouring solar system and cause as much mayhem as possible in order to qualify for maturity. Which, of course, is where Earth comes in, used not so much as a sandbox as a litter tray for a prank rampage of this alien interloper-cum-teenage tearaway.

Kozumi can 'scan' any one of the inhabitants of *Under The Skin*'s compact levels, and use one of many nearby UFOs as a changing room to assume that person's form in order to wander unnoticed. Every time you change into a fresh skin you're given five comedic contraptions to unleash on the populace who, when suitably harassed, will drop coins for you to collect. There's no limit to how quickly you can use up your five mischief-making devices; in fact, using them up in quick succession on a confused and dazed crowd is often the best way to tease out ever-greater numbers of coins. But once they're gone, you'll need to find another body to snatch, and repeat the process all over again with a replenished fistful of destructive props.

It's the satisfaction of these props that's a major part of the game's appeal. They range from simple kindergarten troublemakers, like an extending boxing glove or a handful of tacks, to weapons of mass disruption – a T-rex stampede, for example, or an oversized, flaming bowling ball.

The levels feature another alien, one who's often an opponent in a dash to get the greatest coin total, or sometimes an ally in a fight against a larger, common foe. Take a pratfall over one of your own traps, or those set by a rival, and you'll spill some coins and have to continue in your pants. Take another hit and your true form will be revealed, meaning you'll have to transform again pretty quickly or be beaten by the victimised humans around you.

It's longevity that seems to be *Under The Skin*'s greatest problem; while it seems to be a worthwhile twoplayer deathmatch game, when the jokeshop charm of it all wears off it seems that there may not be much remaining under that skin, after all.

Blinx 2: Masters Of Time And Space

Format: Xbox
Publisher: Microsoft
Developer: Artoon
Origin: Japan
Release: Q4 2004

Artoon's broken timepiece gets another chance to prove its worth, roping in yet another dimension for the cause

Artoon seems to have been granted nine lives' worth of grace, with the chance to put right the wrongs of what was, to many, an astronomical letdown. The original *Blinx: The Time Sweeper* was a game that choked rather than purred under the tick-tock logic of time control, scuppered by the confused and undernourished implementation of an ambitious set of ideas.

Has Artoon set out to make amends? The first five minutes of the game certainly implies so. Whether as a concession to the hateful character design of Blinx himself, or as a sweetener for a game that's been fitted out with some significant multiplayer options, *Blinx 2* opens with the chance to customise your feline Time Sweeper to within a whisker of your heart's content.

There seems to have been a significant relaxation in terms of time controls, too. Collecting a time-control power is no longer a matter of having to match three pickups in a row, but simply a case of collecting any and all of them as you go along. There are moments when the use of time controls are prompted, too, such as when confronted by a blast of enemy firepower from a nearby gun emplacement.

The Time Sweeper's quest, however, is just a quarter of what *Blinx 2* appears to offer, which is where that plural in the title comes good. A horizontal splitscreen mode allows for cooperative play through the main quest, and is the only way to open up a number of areas that have to be tackled in tandem.

However, it seems that the masters of space aren't the titular Time Sweepers; the game includes a parallel quest that follows the stealthy antics of the thieving Tom-Tom Gang, and features a similar twoplayer cooperative element. Playing as the Tom-Tom gang involves infiltrating strongholds patrolled by Time Sweepers, and is facilitated by using decoys, banana skins and stun darts to scupper the guards on patrol. And this is where the game's fifth dimension comes into play, with your Tom-Tom characters able to enter subspace, sink into the floor and scan the area ahead for as long as they can hold their breath.

So, *Blinx 2* offers far-ranging character customisation, a team-based reconsideration of the original and an entirely new spatial spin in the form of the Tom-Toms' quest. Enough with the new, though: does enough of the old *Blinx* still remain in the new game to make it all for nought? Time, all too appropriately, will tell.













When confronted with shrapnel from an enemy gun emplacement, you've the option to pause, and suck up the bullets with your sweeper, or slow down time for a Matrix-style series of bendy dodges





Sid Meier's Pirates

Format: **PC, Xbox**
Publisher: **Atari**
Developer: **Firaxis**
Origin: **US**
Release: **Q4 2004**

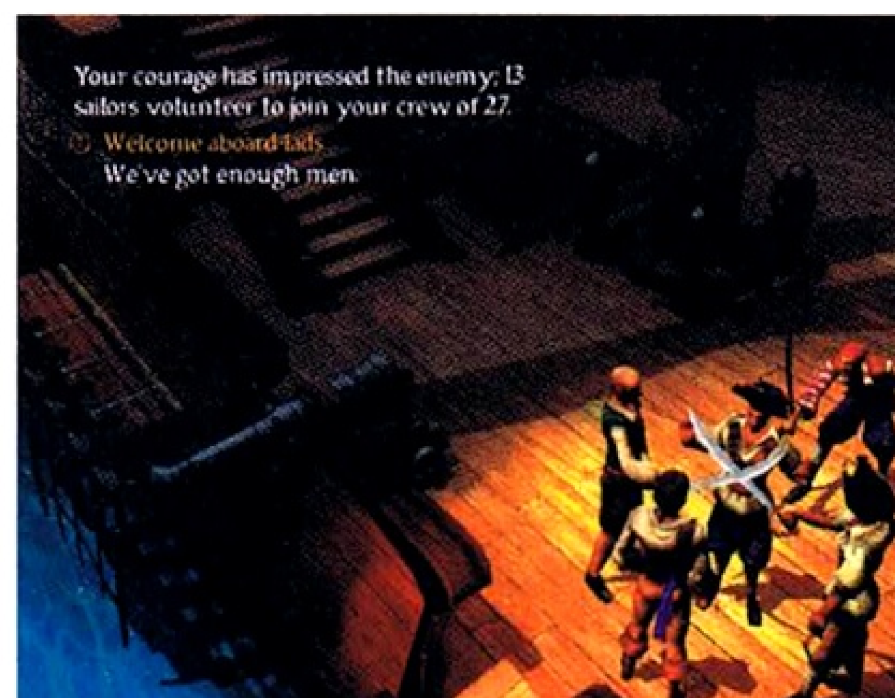
In which Firaxis plunders the Caribbean and grabs itself some fine 17-year-old booty





Bartenders are the know-it-alls of the *Pirates* universe. They provide a guide for the player, suggesting directions they might want to head for further adventuring. Still, all the advice in the world won't win you the hand of the governor's daughter if you're rubbish at dancing...





It troubles me a little bit," says Firaxis CEO **Jeff Briggs**, considering the future of videogames. "I think there's a move towards a more linear theory of game design. Talk to any publisher and the first thing they want to know is: 'What's the story?' And with us it's like: 'Whatever the player wants'."

Pirates, the return of a game idea premiered by Briggs and Sid Meier back in 1987, is about as non-linear as you'd expect from the team that gave the world *Civilisation*. "There's no scripted story at all. There's one overriding arc, that your family has been kidnapped by pirates, and one way of doing well is to rescue them all – your mother and father, sister, uncle, brothers. *Every* pirate had a family scattered across the Caribbean," quips Briggs. "But that's just one way.

"So, you could do well by getting rich through plunder, you could do well by being a privateer for one of the nations and getting promoted through the ranks to an admiral. There's this whole buried treasure thing – there are ten historical pirates in the game, like Blackbeard, or Henry Morgan, and strangely enough they've all buried treasure somewhere in the Caribbean. You can buy pieces of maps at taverns, but when you find the treasure, it pisses them off, and they start coming after you. Then there's the fame race, to become the most fearsome pirate. Or you could try and marry the top governor's daughter." Or have a girl in every port, perhaps? And indeed you can.

A word on the wooing – it's a rhythm-action section where you have to follow the dance steps indicated by the object of your affection. *Pirates* could be regarded as a collection of minigames bonded together by the (self-written) story arc, a diverse, pacey adventure, whose genre is as much dictated by the player as it is by the developer. A jack of all trades, and a master of…? "One of the problems we have is that there are so many games now that focus on one of those genres exclusively, like fighting games, swordfighting games, and they do it very well, devote full US$10m budgets to doing just do that," explains Briggs. "In our game that's only one of the action elements, and there are eight, so the game is more about the overarching life of the pirate. So each of the sequences has to be fun to do over and over, but we have to be quick, zippy, [to] get the player to make a few decisions and then move on."

So, there's the swordfighting element for melee combat; the top-down battling for sailing ships; the resource management for pre-sail preparation; the stealth component for sneaking into towns – and so on. It's true to the spirit of the original as it is to the philosophy of Firaxis – iterative game development to the benefit of all. It believes freedom is the future, and it's not afraid to revisit the past to prove it.



Pressure cookin'

Briggs on the pressure of developing a follow-up to such a highly regarded title: "It is a lot of pressure. I'm keeping my fingers crossed; I hope that we deliver. I think that we are. One thing we've tried to keep in mind is that the guys who played the original games are 17 years older. Many of them have kids of their own, and we want the game to be appealing to those kids, too. It's one of the most easy games to pick up and play I've ever seen."



Players of the original will recall swordfighting. *Soul Calibur* it is not, but competent blade wielders can string together pleasing sequences



Project: Snowblind

Format: PC, PS2, Xbox
Publisher: Eidos
Developer: Crystal Dynamics
Origin: US
Release: Q4

Deus Ex was supposed to be the FPS that brought the sophistication and subtlety of an RPG to the genre. But what if you just like shooting things?

Whatever *Deus Ex: Invisible War*'s strengths, it had its share of disappointments. One strength was the weapon modification system; one of the disappointments was its gunplay. It's no wonder, then, that an FPS based on Denton's universe is one which has provoked as much enthusiasm as hesitation. Early signs, however, are that Crystal Dynamics has preserved the flexibility and sensitivity of *Invisible War*'s upgrades while evolving the gunplay into chunkily satisfying firefights.

Although fire, in this instance, is perhaps the last thing you'll be fighting with. One of *Snowblind*'s major hooks is the imaginative range of weaponry you'll have access to. As well as pistols and grenades, there are nasty new inventions such as a gun which shoots a shower of sentient flesh-eaters. Let rip a round and you can duck back under cover, watching with fascinated horror as they flock from one unfortunately enemy to the next, triggering shrieking panic as they go. Crystal Dynamics also promises a physics-based weapon – a kind of magnetic grenade which once deployed will either repulse all metal in the area, forcing it outward in a wave of improvised shrapnel, or pull it inward, wrenching guns out of enemies' hands.

As well as this arsenal of creative instruction, *Snowblind* will give you access to *Invisible War*'s biomod system, allowing your character to develop superhuman skills helping him sneak or stomp his way through victory. Overall, the combination of the two systems looks like a promising way to marry *Deus Ex*'s RPG heritage into the solid, spectacular gunplay a pure FPS requires.

That solidity extends to the environments, which are detailed and dense. The game's Hong Kong setting has given artists free reign to let loose with flaring neon and thundering monsoons and the skill with which they've been created bodes well for the later, more open sections of the game. You share these environments with your squad mates, who – though autonomous – you'll be required to guide, protect and heal. At this stage there's no clear sense of how well this will work, especially as games rarely make squad behaviour anything other than infuriating.

While there may be anxieties over AI and squad behaviour, the game's online capabilities will sidestep any of these questions. Few details have been confirmed yet, but the typical range of FPS battle modes will be available, with up to 16 players supported on Xbox and PS2.















All guns have a secondary fire function, such as a sniper scope, and you also have access to grenades. Flicking between weapons is easy and intuitive, which encourages experimentation

Ratchet & Clank 3: Up Your Arsenal

Format: **PlayStation2**
Publisher: **SCEE**
Developer: **Insomniac Games**
Origin: **US**
Release: **November**

Insomniac Games sticks to its guns (and *that* subtitle) for an even more intense ballistic ballet



Insomniac Games must have one of the worst of the best jobs around. Its *Ratchet & Clank* series is with headshot accuracy zeroed in on gameplay via gunplay. With such focus it must be so, so easy to see how to make your game better, but so, so hard to see how to make it different without invoking change for its own sake.

Ratchet & Clank: Up Your Arsenal is, like *R&C2*, well summed up by describing it as just the previous game but with phasers set to something far more deadly than just 'stun'. Within the opening level – a stage filled with chunky and familiar *R&C* scenery – things take an instant turn for the intense, with Ratchet pitched into a fray between invading aliens and the planet's defence force. It's a far less asinine beginning than the typically dull opening hour of either of the previous games.

And so it's straight into battle, and into some weapons. Such as the excellent plasma whip, a firecracker of a melee weapon that snaps and lashes around the player in a deadly spiral. Or the Infector, a goo-gobbing gun whose slimy payload turns enemies against one another, adding as much to the chaos as your odds of survival.



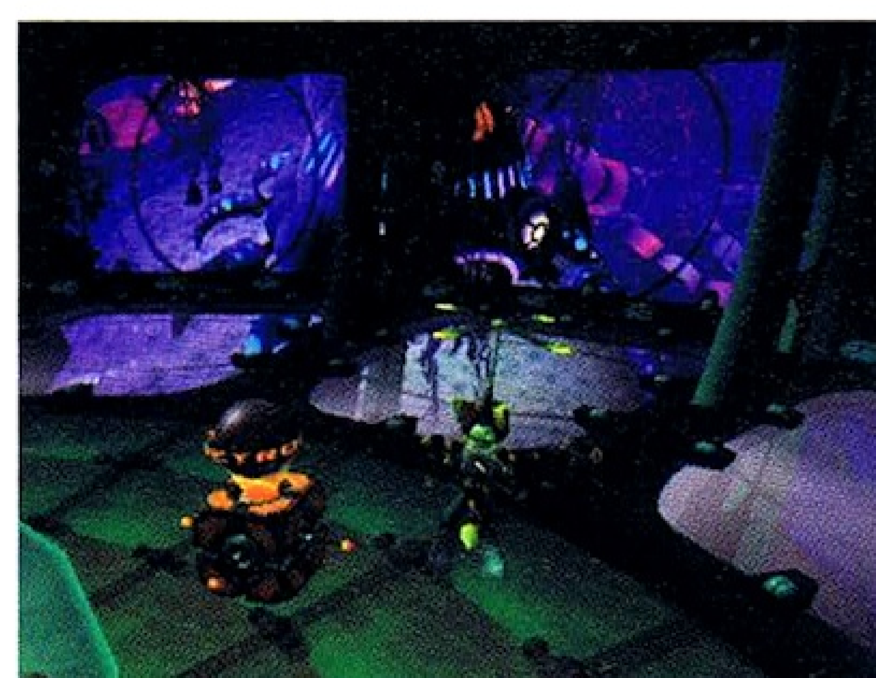
We've not had chance to play *Up Your Arsenal* online, but the promise is there for a frantic and bombastic team deathmatch experience

Each weapon is upgradeable several times over, and your nanotech (health bar) seems to upgrade every few minutes, instead of every few levels. This time, it seems, there are enough upgrades to put *Need For Speed Underground* to shame. And it's clear that this is going to be the most busy and challenging *R&C* yet, with the player swiftly encountering the kind of resistance that didn't appear until the latter stages of the previous games.

While the bulk of play is concerned with the traditional template of loud, flexible and brutal gunplay interspersed with gently funnelled, functional puzzling, there are the expected new details and slants. Within the first level, for example, is a mini-skydiving scene, the player weaving between a wave of missiles. Later, playing as bumbling loser Captain Quark, you'll have the chance to take on some classy 2D platforming.

This third outing is looking to prove one thing – that *R&C* is one of the few game series that sits comfortably with both ludicrous subtitles and the bigger/faster/louder culture of sequels.







Refinements include temporary invincibility and bolt-collecting multipliers. Also, you can now restock all your ammo in one simple purchase







Midnight Club 3: DUB Edition

Format: PS2, Xbox
Publisher: Rockstar
Developer: In-house (Rockstar San Diego)
Origin: US
Release: Q4

The studio once responsible for the Midtown Madness games is back for a third stab at the Midnight franchise

Wyclef Jean owns a truck. It is a custom model featuring an on-board fish tank. In the tank swim baby sharks. Welcome to the world of extreme automotive makeovers, the backbone of Rockstar's third *Club* title.

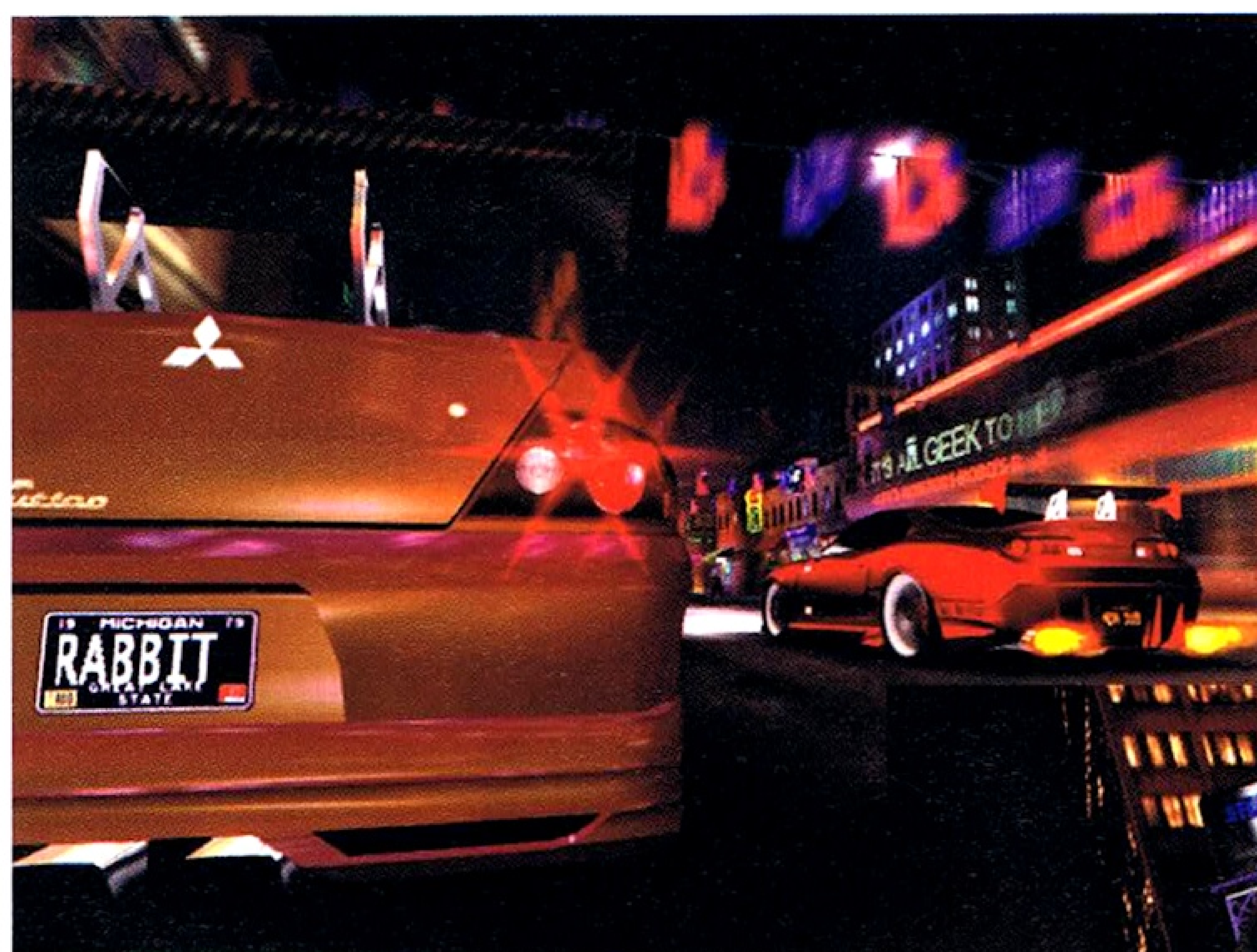
There's nothing quite as outrageous as the ex-Fugees man's ride in the game; rather you're faced with a variety of spoilers, exhausts, bonnet vents, underlighting, etc, that add simple performance upgrades and obvious aesthetic overhauls. Everything is licensed from real-world manufacturers and incorporated under advisement from the staff of DUB magazine, the American publication dedicated to modding luxury autos.

Once you've tinkered and refined your vehicle it's into the game proper, spread over three cities – Detroit, Atlanta and San Diego. Driving challenges commonly involve A-to-B races but also incorporate outrunning police and drag races at beach locations.

It is immediately obvious that you're dealing with graphics technology that is new to the series: Rockstar San Diego's engine uses five times the texture memory of the previous game, and the result is a racing environment that belches atmosphere. The vehicles themselves are so shiny it's almost dazzling and, with the faster cars, background detail whips past in a riot of busy colour. In fact, your performance in the first few races may well be negatively affected by all the detail being flung at you, because shrugging off aggressive CPU opponents while looking for boost opportunities and simultaneously keeping an eye on the map *and* monitoring the road ahead is already a juggling act that requires considerable concentration. Getting to know these cities intimately will therefore be a high priority.

At least the various motorcycles – from hogs to sports machines – are easier to handle this time around, their twitchiness having been noticeably reduced. Gunning one of the quicker examples down a packed street, on to a ramp and over a moving train is an explosively entertaining rush.

Clearly, the driving game market has reached something like saturation point, and *Club 3*'s Big New Thing – its suite of customisation options – has already been seen in the likes of *Need For Speed: Underground* and, more recently, *Juiced*. The real difference with Rockstar's game is that the vehicles on offer aren't likely to fall within gamers' real-world budgets. Its line-up of truly exotic hardware will set it apart.









It'll be possible to store up to 20 vehicles in your garage, including bikes, classics, sports saloons and Hummers (above). New sets of wheels can be acquired with cash or by winning races



Each of the vehicles is now licensed, as are the individual parts. Detail extends right down to rims: the spokes on each wheel are no longer represented by flat textures but by full 3D models



Midnight multiplayer

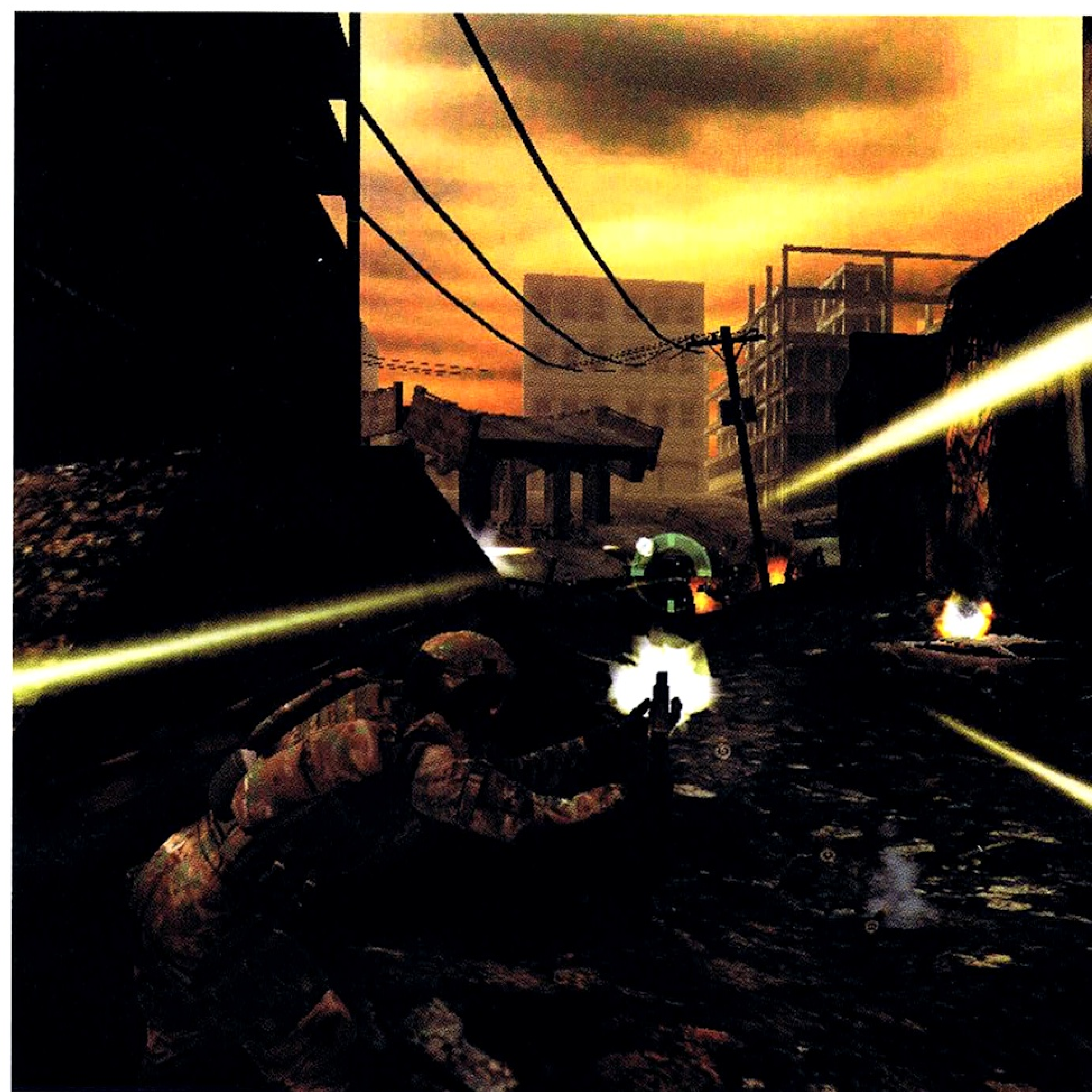
The previous instalment of *Midnight Club* was one of the first PS2 titles to offer online gaming functionality, and support for connectivity is being pursued with the sequel. Rockstar is offering eightplayer online races, an interface to support detailed stats for players, and the ability to join races in progress. Moreover, the game will allow host migration, ensuring that races can be finished if the original host drops out.

Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon 2

The Ghosts return to face a fresh North Korean nuclear threat, with discrete PS2 and Xbox coders in tow. But are two development teams really better than one?



In order to emphasise that you can die at any moment, there's no health meter – anathema for console shooters – although you are given an indication of the overall well-being of your squad



As far as videogames are concerned, it's taken for granted that guns are good. Which makes guns with built-in cameras allowing you to shoot around corners even better. Combine that with airburst grenades and the ability to call in your own personal air strike and you can see why gamers may be tempted to eschew *Ghost Recon 2*'s squad-based manoeuvrings in favour of the new Lone Wolf mode, which sees your character equipped with an arsenal of such prototype soldiers' toys.

But while the Lone Wolf function offers a reassuringly gung-ho take on proceedings, it's the team-based Campaign mode that remains at the heart of *Ghost Recon 2*. In contrast to the resolutely bland conceit behind the action (rogue North Korean general diverts humanitarian aid to feed his own army, invades China, threatens to instigate nuclear exchange), Ubisoft has taken a rather more radical approach to the actual development of the game, with the PS2 and Xbox iterations being coded by separate teams. Indeed, they are in effect entirely different games – a ploy primarily designed to avoid the usual Clancy problem of the Sony game being a poor man's incarnation of the Microsoft version. Where they share common characters, weapons and general locations, they will not share any missions. The Xbox version will feature larger play areas and a slower, more considered pace, while PS2 gamers will get a fast game with smaller battlefields.

The greater emphasis on action means you control a group of four soldiers, as opposed to the teams that featured in the first Recon



Common to both formats is a new over-the-shoulder perspective, although it's also possible to revert to a firstperson view

While players are faced with a familiar array of 15 missions set across the North Korean countryside that place them in charge of a squad of crack operatives, the game's greater emphasis on action now means that both versions see you control a single group of four soldiers, as opposed to the two or three teams that featured in the first *Recon*. The notion is that gamers will always be at the heart of the action, although this is at the expense of the tactical manipulations of the original. Neither are you able to pick your own squad – the team for each mission is pre-selected – which surely results in the loss of another of the game's strategic layers.

But it has other offerings this time round. There's a major focus on the online aspect of both incarnations and the PS2 version – actually a prequel set four years prior to its Xbox stablemate – even has a dedicated team of 30 at Ubisoft's Montreal studio toiling away purely on the game's online multiplayer functions, which will support up to 16 players with voice communication.

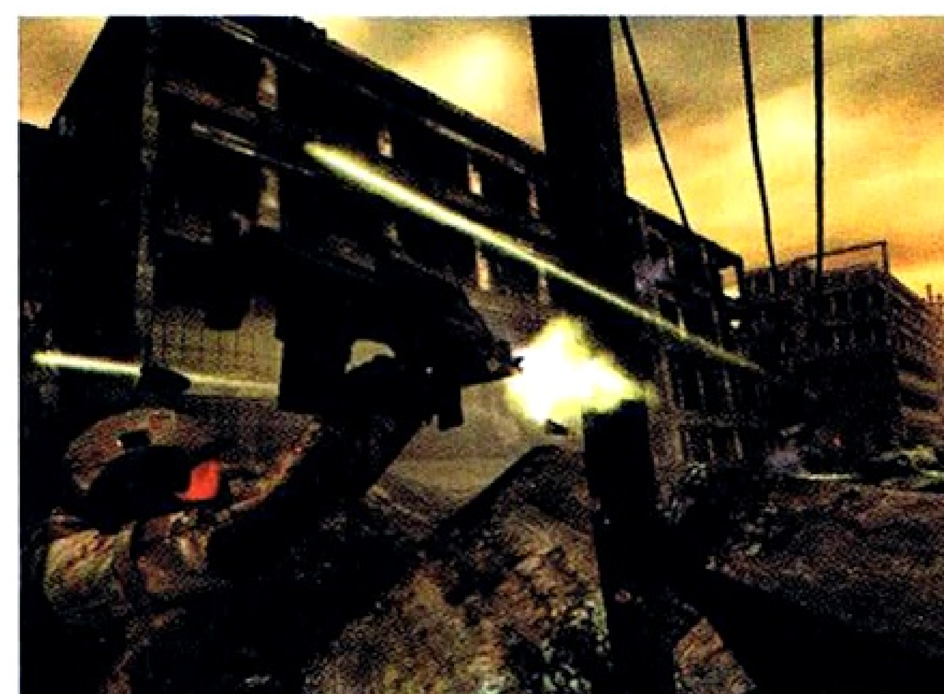
An improved ranking system motivates gamers to balance the two competing teams and to include new players: more points are earned for attaining victory with less experienced operatives. 'Me first' gunplay is now also discouraged as members of winning teams are rewarded with an equal number of points – unlike, say, *Jungle Storm* in which you were remunerated for individual achievements. The PS2 game (which utilises the Unreal engine and Havok physics) also includes an intriguing Colour Of War function that Ubisoft is at pains to herald: as you enter a combat situation, the colour gradually drains

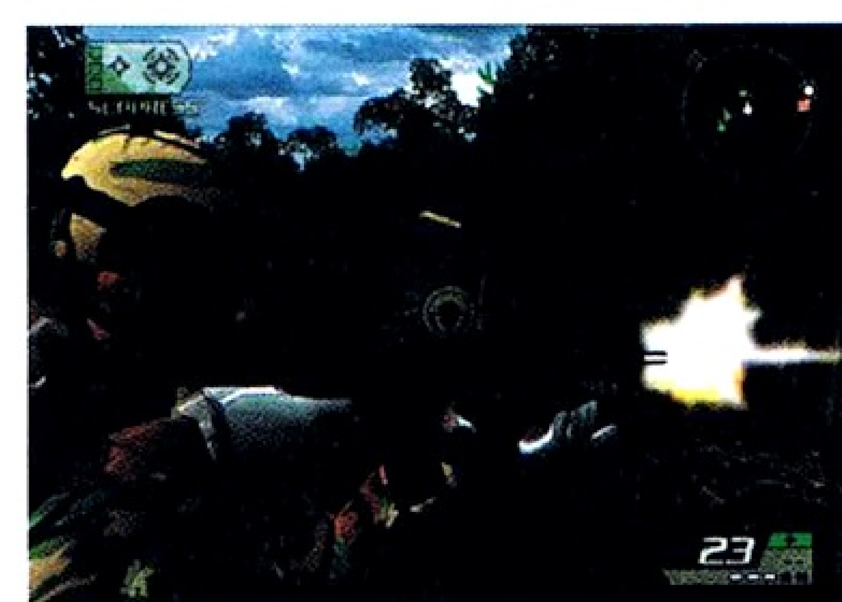
Format: **PS2, Xbox**
Publisher: **Ubisoft**
Developer: **In-house (PS2), Red Storm (Xbox)**
Origin: **China, US**
Release: **November 18**









A new context-sensitive command interface allows players to instruct their troops on where to go and how to behave (scout ahead, lay suppressive fire, take out enemies with grenades, etc) with the minimum of fuss

away from the visuals to bequeath a bleak Black Hawk Down-style aesthetic.

Meanwhile, over on Microsoft's console, we're promised an altogether more realistic and less forgiving war experience (although it remains to be seen how much credibility rests in not being able to crawl through sundry shrubbery). The proprietary-engine-based title includes the expected additional singleplayer functions (Recon, Defend, Firefight) plus a more captivating multiplayer experience (which offers fourplayer splitscreen and link-up as well as Xbox Live, allowing for up to eight players across just two machines, for instance). Central to this is the Xbox-exclusive Cat And Mouse, in which the first of up to 16 players to gain a kill becomes the Lone Wolf supersoldier. The Lone Wolf character is then transformed into the objective and whoever kills him gains the prototype kit. Think Running Man with added air strikes.

At the time of its console release, the first *Ghost Recon* was the most exciting Xbox Live experience available. *GR2* will struggle to achieve that status, but this promises to be a superior online squad-based experience – for both Xbox *and* PS2. Although whether the Clancy hardcore will be disenfranchised by some of the title's concessions to the mainstream remains to be seen.

Subsequent to the title's November debut, Red Storm will then go on to code a PC version, while Ubisoft Shanghai will set to work on a GameCube outing. Rogue members of the Korean military have been duly cautioned.

Prescreen Alphas

This month's announcements and updates

Area 51

Format: PS2, Xbox
Publisher: Midway
Developer: In-house




Midway's dark-horse shooter gains a deliciously appropriate voice cast: David Duchovny as the protagonist, Powers Boothe as a gruff major and Marilyn Manson as Edgar, the Grey alien

Zoids Struggle

Format: PlayStation2
Publisher: Tomy
Developer: Eighting

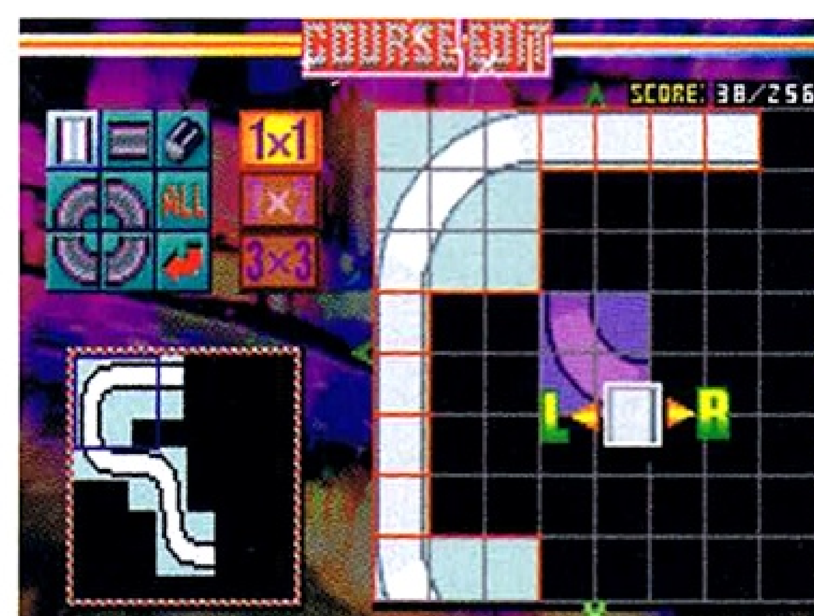



To date, the mechanised dinosaurs have been a franchise without a worthy console title – but this offering from ex-shooter developer Eighting, detouring from *Kururin*, could be the exception

F-Zero Climax

Format: Game Boy Advance
Publisher: Nintendo
Developer: In-house



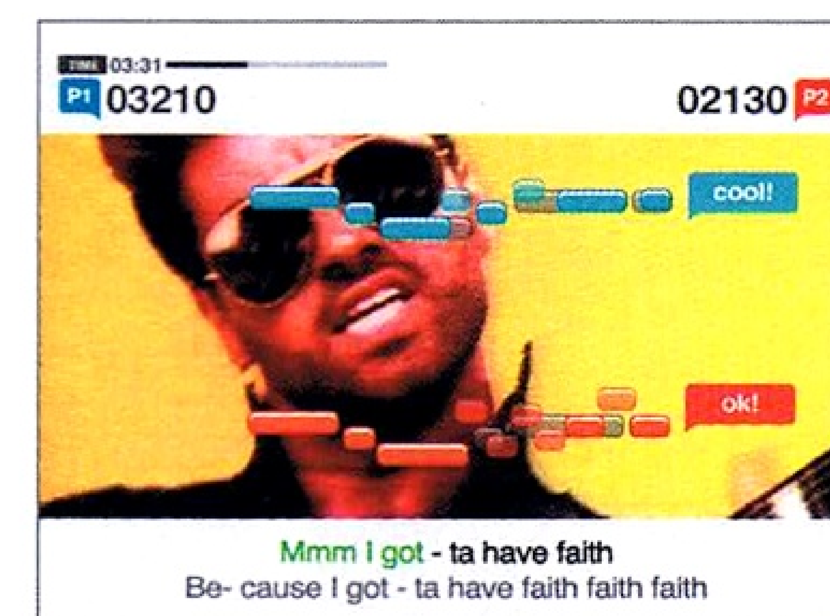


Though *Climax* features two new special attacks and a gruelling Survival Mode, it's the Course Edit that appeals most. A password data system allows finished courses to be saved and traded

SingStar Party

Format: PlayStation2
Publisher: SCEA
Developer: In-house





Multiplayer modes are the focus of this *SingStar* expansion, including a duet mode that can be inflicted on 30 new tracks or the original's lineup. More importantly: 'I Think We're Alone Now'

Grand Theft Auto (working title)

Format: Game Boy Advance
Publisher: Rockstar
Developer: Digital Eclipse/Rockstar





A curious visual collision between *GTA*'s original gangster style and post-*GTAIII* cues, the all-conquering franchise goes handheld with a new storyline and a 'sprawling' top-down Liberty City

Super Monkey Ball Deluxe

Format: PS2, Xbox
Publisher: Sega
Developer: In-house





With all the levels from the first two games, nearly 50 new tortuous trails and all the minigames, there's no excuse for PS2 and Xbox owners not to get to grips with Expert Level 7

Killzone

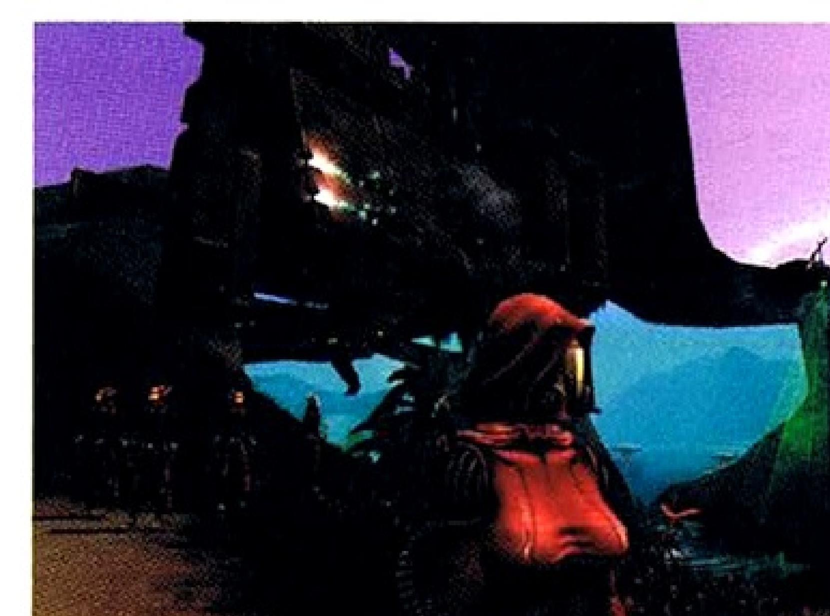
Format: PlayStation2
Publisher: SCEA
Developer: Guerilla




The gloomy, bombed-out beauty of the game remains, but closer inspection has revealed some worrying structural damage in the rigid repetition of event scripting and the kerbs you can't climb

The Saga Of Ryzom

Format: PC
Publisher: Nevrax
Developer: In-house

Nevrax's MMO – hopefully fully operational by the time you read this – has been picked up for distribution by Ubisoft, which seems to be collecting a set along with *FFXI* and *EverQuest2*

WALLET-FRIENDLY FIRE

As beefier tech specs and supercharged graphics chips continually push the realism agenda, the bedroom coder has returned to making shooters with a new mantra borrowed from Japan's Treasure: 'be attitude for gains'

Listen to the *Doom 3* previews: 'Lifelike facial expressions'; 'Some of the most realistic-looking realtime rendered characters'. And here's the first question put to *Half-Life 2*'s developers during a recent online chat: "Will the game feature *Soldier Of Fortune*-style realistic damage?"

Even something as subversively thrilling as *Burnout 3* was initially lauded for its looks over its content. While there's an undeniable thrill in wandering around a world that, more or less, looks and behaves like the one you're used to, what happened to abstract gaming? Plotless, pointless action that looks distinctive and where feel – and atmosphere – is all.

It's been pushed underground, into a shooter scene which has transcended its shaky shareware origins and matured into a sturdy subculture. The small, but perfectly formed, games that emerge – particularly from the Japanese Doujin (freeware) stables – are potent hits of pure game-buzz. An ideal antidote to much of the over-egged flab being flogged on the high street.

As ever, it's thank you Mr Internet. As broadband's increased availability has expanded the scope for multimedia downloading, spare-time coders can now design a game, host a demo on some

cheaply acquired web space and, with a link to an online payment company, sell a complete, full-price version – all without the permission of publisher superpowers.

And, while the internet has its share of weirdy Flash games and hack-job puzzlers, it's shoot 'em ups that tend to dominate. "Shooters are a quick thing to develop," says **Matt Verran** of Hermit Games (author of *Super Mario-Pac* and *Asteroids/Ikaruga* hybrid *'Troid*). "You just put a sprite on-screen, get it moving around, add some bullets, something for the bullets to hit, and you have a shoot 'em up. It's also very easy to change gameplay radically by just tweaking a small thing. You have plenty of control over what you can force the player to do – without complex physics or AI or anything."

It's a punk-style reaction to the slick, but often empty and over-complex, prog rock of commercial games. Learn your basic three-chord/get-a-sprite-on-screen technique, and then form a band/design a shooter. Stepping outside the financial comfort zone provided by big publishers offers a key advantage: creative freedom. Many of the higher-profile internet shooters were designed by coders disillusioned with designing games to some kind of market specification.

Mike Michael of PomPom Games (*Mutant Storm*, *Space Tripper*) is an ex-employee of Argonaut Software. "It wasn't much fun," he says. "You have to keep going off on strange tangents in order to accommodate a particular bit of technology. Commercial games have become more about technology and less about the game. With *Space Tripper*, we had a vision at the start that was the same halfway through and at the end. That doesn't happen in the commercial sector. Decisions are often made far away from the development heart."



Space Tripper: 'an essay in balance' and 'instinctive and addictive'

JAPANESE

WARNING FOREVER

www18.big.or.jp/~hikoza/Prod



Boss-rush bliss. A beautiful-looking vertical shooter with a vector-ish vibe. Takes the standard formula and strips out the tiresome business of shooting lots of little enemies before you get a go at the big boss. A procession of bigger, badder, increasingly tooled-up bosses. No more, no less. While other shooters treat bosses as a convention, *Warning Forever* revels in them.

CHO REN SHA 68K

www2.tky.3web.ne.jp/~yosshin



Vertical shmups are abundant, but this is a standout, with stylised 8bit looks concealing modern gameplay. Instead of bombarding you with power-ups, it lets you modify your style of play by offering a choice of three (weapon power-up, extra bomb, shield).

PERFECT CHERRY BLOSSOM

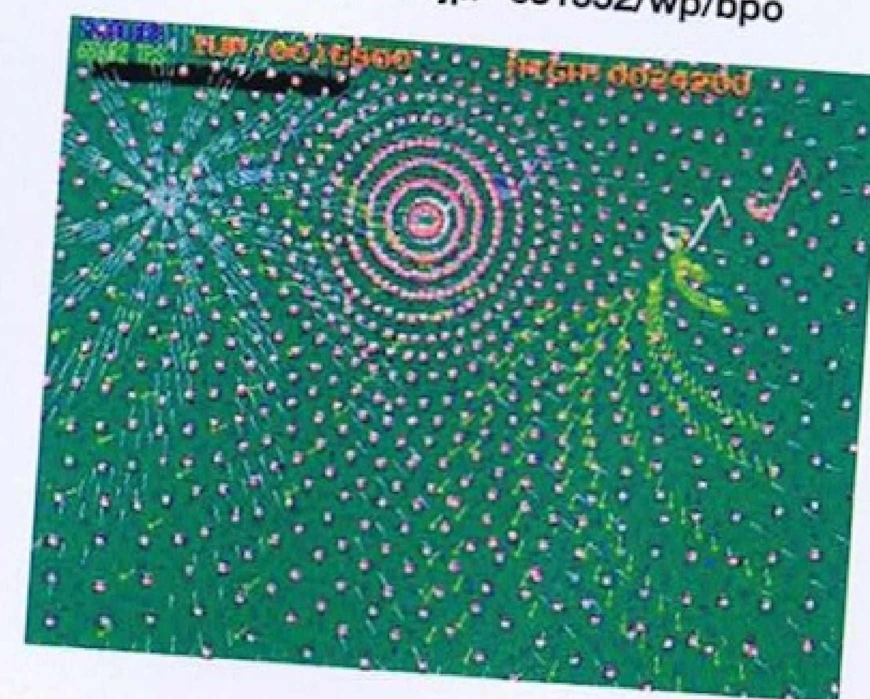
www16.big.or.jp/~zun/html/th07.html



The best of the out-and-out bullet-hell shmups (or 'curtain shooters'). The slightly frilly pinkness ('Girls do their best now… please watch warmly until it is ready') is all a front. *PCB* is steely, tough, and a slick, professional job that wouldn't look out of place on DC or PS2.

BULLET PHILHARMONIC ORCHESTRA

user.ecc.u-tokyo.ac.jp/~s31552/wp/bpo



An enchanting mix of *Vib Ribbon* and shooter, the game devises geometric, 'buzz'-able bullet patterns depending on the rhythm and pace of the mp3s you tell it to follow. It's a shmup, but it feels like an interactive WinAmp visualisation.

"YOU PUT A SPRITE ON-SCREEN, GET IT MOVING AROUND, ADD BULLETS, SOMETHING FOR THEM TO HIT, AND YOU HAVE A SHOOTER"

SCORE SOLDIER

homepage2.nifty.com/isshiki/prog_win_game.html



A moreish shooter from the wonderfully named Hello World Project. Collect red and blue capsules to power up your ship; bag bonuses for destroying multiples of 100 enemies. A bit easy, maybe, but pure, abstract and relentless.

RROOTAGE

www.asahi-net.or.jp/~cs8k-cyu/index_e.html



Kenta Cho has designed plenty of shooters worth investigating, including *Tumiki Fighters*, *Parsec47* and *Noiz2sa*. But *rRootage* is the most accomplished; certainly the one most influenced by commercial shmups. Four different modes based on individual shooter styles (*Psyvariar*'s 'buzz' system, *Ikaruga*'s chaining, *Giga Wing*'s bullet-absorb and the standard shoot-everything-and-dodge-bullets mode). The Mac versions of *Noiz2sa* and *rRootage* are spot on.

EVERY EXTEND

nagoya.cool.ne.jp/o_mega/product/e2.html



Another mini-innovator that poses the perplexing question: 'One day, suddenly you receive 12 UCHU-guided bombs. What do you do?' Answer: blow yourself up and take the bad guys with you. *Psyvariar* and *Shikigami No Shiro* have their 'buzz' system, *Every Extend* goes further and makes suicide painless.

Like most homebrew shooter designers, Michael's design logic is based on trying to ape the feel of other games that he loves; to figure out what they're doing right and then rework it his own way: "With *Space Tripper*, we didn't do any market research or anything like that. I just wanted to write a game that was trying to be as good as something timeless like *Defender*. I wanted to achieve a certain level of pain – where you're not even sure that you're having fun any more. I've only ever got that from shoot 'em ups."

There's a big pleasure in stripping away stifling management tiers and taking responsibility for something yourself. It's a theme that carries over to good shooter gameplay: if it all goes wrong, at least you can say: 'That was my fault. I'll do better, next time'. As Verran says: "I don't want to compromise my idea of what the game should be like. I find it more fun to do everything myself and if it doesn't work out, it's all my fault".

If you really want to get your game out there, then you might consider getting involved with one of the companies acting like indie music labels, which are willing to accommodate less mainstream games and take on the hassle and overheads in return for a profit cut. Mind those seductive advances, though…

Rights of man

On the strength of a demo of his ace side-scroller, *Platypus*, **Anthony Flack** sold the rights to Idigicon (then Guildhall Leisure) for £1,500 (AU$3,770). He thought it was a good deal, given that the full version probably wouldn't take that long to finish. "It took 18 gruelling months," says Flack. "When the game was released into the shops, it was well received, but I don't think Idigicon had anything more in mind for it than to prop up the bottom of the bargain bin."

Flack later passed on the rights to an online company who tweaked and repositioned it, the game become a big hit on download site RealArcade (www.realarcade.com). "Everyone involved has made a good deal of money off the game," says Flack. "Apart from

WESTERN

CRAZYGAME.EXE
s87336291.onlinehome.us/crazygame.exe



A compulsive little curio that takes bullet dodging to its purest extreme. The premise couldn't be simpler: how long can you stay alive on a single, non-scrolling screen full of multi-directional bullets? It probably took about ten minutes to write, perfectly illustrating the point about shmup principles being the most accessible to novice DIY coders.

GALSHELL: BLOOD RED SKIES
marimo.sakura.ne.jp/~trapped/bacurec



Aaand in the bloody-mindedly non-commercial corner… this is a pathologically Giger-inspired horizontal shooter with plenty of visceral, Freudian ickiness. Clunky, but certainly a change from zappy lasers and sterile ships.

me. But I'm not bitter. I signed the contract, no one did anything illegal. But I learned a big lesson – KEEP the rights."

Iain McLeod, author of psycho psychedelic shooter *Spheres Of Chaos*, agrees: "Do online sales yourself. With a simple payment processing company, you'll get 80 per cent of the sale price, and not the 25 per cent you'd get if you signed everything over to a publisher. Shooters are perfect for this format, because they're easy to sell in bite-sized chunks. They tend to be quick, small downloads with instant accessibility and gameplay that requires learning a few simple skills, with the game getting harder and harder and taxing those skills more and more.

"Puzzlers only appeal to specific tastes and platform games tend to be badly structured – you keep going through the same levels over and over to get to the one difficult level where you keep getting killed."

Fire sale

So, why is it so hard to translate such pure gameplay into something more broadly sellable?

"It's the industry's obsession with technology," says Michael. "It reminds me of the car business. As we get better and better technology and faster, more technically impressive cars, more people believe that there's no need to build simpler, smaller cars. The love for our art has gone from this industry. In film and music, the bigger boys are still interested in innovation. But all we want to do is stick to this mediocre, formula approach. It reminds you of why it's still an immature industry."

There's also an aspect of self-fulfilling prophecy. Keep feeding consumers familiar, convincingly rendered worlds and, eventually, they'll lose all taste for anything 'different' altogether. The benchmark for this is still *Rez* – a brilliantly realised game that failed to make any commercial impact. The message to publishers: consumers don't want weirdy, blasty experimentation, they want comfort.

DEADEYE
www.wayoftherodent.com/deadeye_teaser.htm



A more wave-based 2D shooter with a strong old-school coin-op sensibility (*Phoenix*, *Galaxian*). The 'risky!' concept (shooting enemies when they're close to your ship) and bullet-absorb feature takes plenty of cues from Japanese shmup principles.

STRAYFIRE
www.gradientstudios.com/strayfire/gamedownloads.html



Decidedly Japophilic vertical shmup from Gradient Studios. Superb, commercial-quality graphics – including parallax, *Ikaruga*-inspired interactive backdrops.

WARBLADE
www.warblade.as



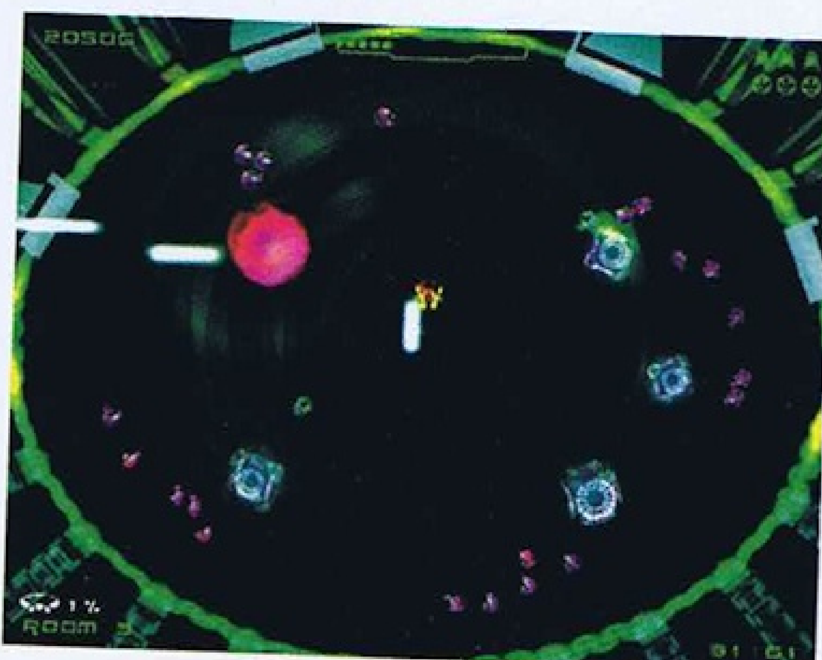
Based on the celebrated Amiga game *Deluxe Galaga* (and by the same author), *Warblade* is a solid enough PC update which packs in the variety but still suffers from the action-breaking business of using tokens to buy power-ups.

BUGATRON
www.retro64.com/bugatron.asp



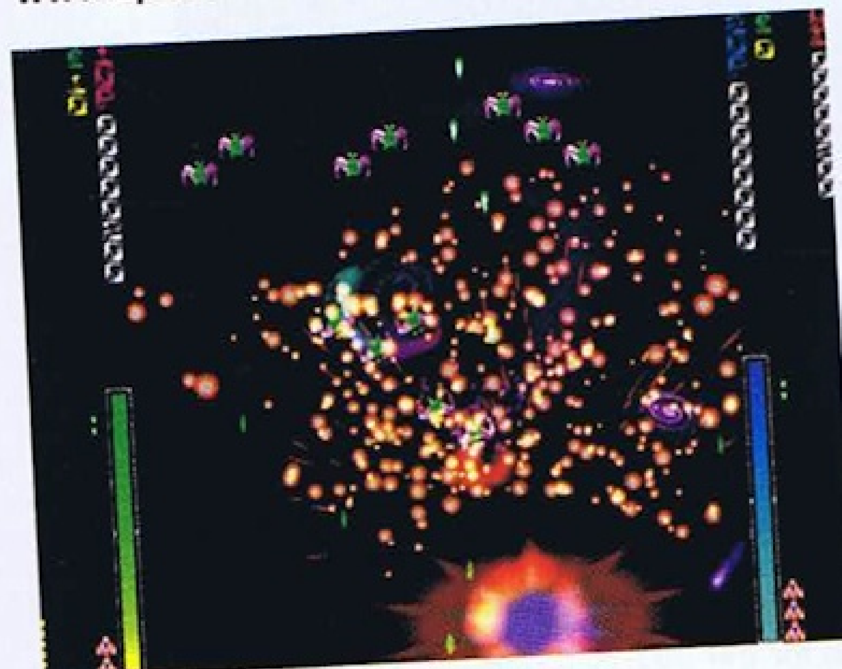
An even purer 16bit-style shooter. Stylistically similar to *Space Birdz*, but more inspired by *Galaga* than *Phoenix*. Plenty of character and humour, with some inventive levels and – best of all – good, old-fashioned power-ups.

MUTANT STORM
www.pompom.org.uk



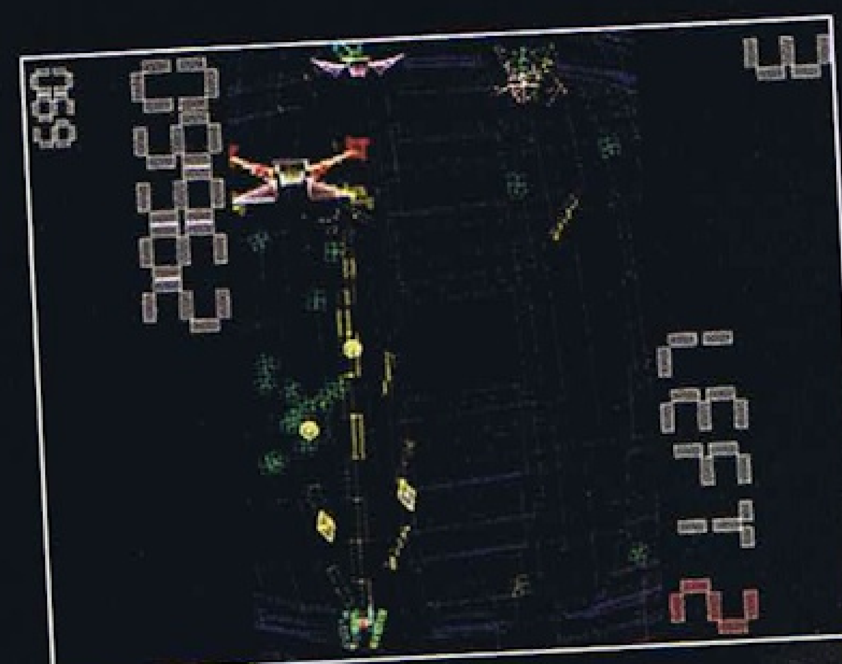
PomPom's stuff can feel a teeny bit over-produced, but there's still masses of playability and longevity in these sumptuous *Defender*/*Robotron*-inspired blasters. Again, extra backslaps for acknowledging the Mac.

SPACE BIRDZ
www.spacebirdz.com



A more successful, Amiga-hungover wave-based shooter. Glossier and better looking than *Warblade* and more immediate. Works well as a straight remake of *Phoenix*, but seasons the formula with its own ideas.

SHOOTERS MAY BE MARGINALISED, BUT THE CREATIVE WORLD THEY LIVE IN IS TIGHTLY KNIT, AND GAMES TAKE CUES FROM EACH OTHER



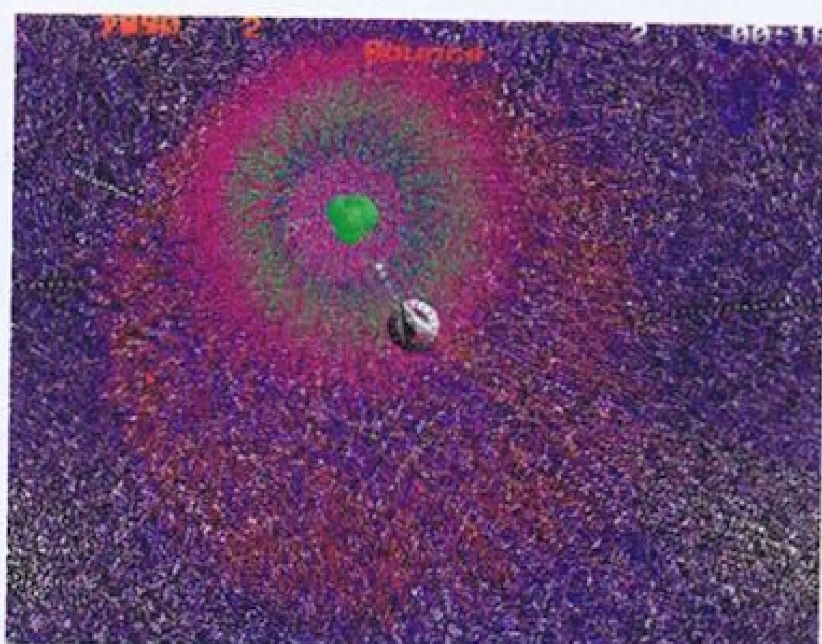
ABA Games' *Parsec47* invites you to 'defeat retro enemies modernly'. Just don't blink

Since *Rez* dared to be different, shooter design has scaled back a little – even in Japan – and the Doujin shooters reflect this, preferring to sprinkle in their own little stealth-tweaks and riffs on familiar formulae (*Warning Forever*'s boss-rush, *rRootage*'s cheerful lifts from *Giga Wing*, *Ikaruga* and *Psyvariar*).

A refreshing element of the home-grown shooter explosion is how, for a change, cultural influences are flowing from east to west. On top of the impact of commercial shooters (Verran claims *'Troid* was 'subconsciously' influenced by *Ikaruga*), the Doujin games are busy making the little leaps in innovation that leak through to western DIY designers. Shooters may be marginalised, but the creative world they live in is tightly knit, and one in which the games take their cues from each other.

It's through a seemingly instinctive affinity with ultra-complex 'bullet hell' shooters that Japanese gaming culture has been viewed as more 'hardcore'. The issue of difficulty never used to be a problem in the arcade era. It was a logical design factor: a machine wouldn't make much money if it was too easy. But, as commercial shooter culture gets more insular, it's in danger of becoming inbred and appealing only to highly skilled players. This is where the homebrew designers step in – twisting and toning down and providing a similarly challenging experience without the publisher fear factor of convincing gamers to pay for something that's 'too hard'. *Gradius V*'s cut-scenes may pay lip service to the mainstream, but the game itself is as uncompromising as ever.

SPHERES OF CHAOS
streamerp2p.com/chaos.htm



A startling mix of some mesmerising, melty psychedelia and a perfectly pitched version of *Asteroids* that boasts power-ups.

DEMONSTAR
www.mking.com/mac



Apart from the Kenta Cho and PomPom conversions, good Macintosh shooters are pretty scarce. Which makes *Demonstar* even more essential. A rock-solid vertical shooter with all the usual power-up trimmings, terrific 3D rendered graphics and bearable music.

BATTLE OF YAVIN BATTLE OF ENDOR
www.bruneras.com



Here's something a lot more ambitious. Bruno Marcos' classic Star Wars trilogy games, rendered in 'TrueVision' 3D, manage to be just as polished and playable as the recent GameCube *Rogue Leader/Rogue Squadron* games. They're also more arcadey and less fussy. Marcos is thinking of developing a further game based on the Hoth AT-AT walker battle. Support this man, and do it right now.

'TROID
www.hermitgames.com/troid.php



Described by author Matt Verran (also responsible for the deeply wonderful *Super Mario Pac*) as '*Asteroids* crossed with *Ikaruga*'. A bit more chemically balanced than *Spheres Of Chaos*, with a nice chaining system (hit three rocks of the same size in a row). Great looking, with some thunderous squelchy electro FX.

THE CONCEPT OF HIDING SMALL, INDEPENDENTLY DEVELOPED GAMES IN COMMERCIAL RELEASES IS STARTING TO FIND FAVOUR

Net gains

Thanks to the internet, bringing a game to the attention of the public isn't a problem any more. Homebrew shooters can share attention space with their commercially developed counterparts. "The internet has become an extension of retail," says Michael. "That whole shareware concept of 'give us what you think it's worth' has gone. The internet is one big marketplace. We're in the same shop window, reaching as many potential customers, as someone like Amazon – and that's very liberating." But until home-grown shooters can find their way onto the shelves of Game and Blockbuster, there will always be a removed, underground element to those barely penetrable Japanese websites and shabby PayPal prop-ups. So, how about taking a stealthier approach?

The concept of hiding small, independently developed games in big commercial releases is starting to find a bit of favour. It may feel a bit undersold, but at least it gets people playing. The inclusion of the original Atari arcade *Star Wars/Empire Strikes Back* in *Rogue Squadron II* was a nod in the right direction, but much more striking is old-school, *Tempest-meets-Robotron* shooter *Geometry Wars*, hiding in the *Project Gotham Racing 2* garage as a surprisingly playable Easter egg.

"*Geometry Wars* started as something I did when I was bored working on *Project Gotham Racing 1*," says designer **Stephen Cakebread**. "I occasionally added stuff to it over the course of two years, and then the *PGR2* producer suggested we put it in as an Easter egg. I was actually given a week in the main schedule to polish it up and put the Live score-tables in. My motivation behind writing it was: 'Take random bits of cool retro gameplay, plug in shedloads of CPU power and see what



Intensity XS (see facing page) has also spawned an update, *Intensity XS: ReCharge*

PLATYPUS

www.squashysoftware.com



As a break from scrolling starfields and samey spacey content, *Platypus* takes a refreshingly unique moulded, 'claymation' approach. The chunky collision detection is offset by bright, jolly looks and an excellent *Pop 'N' Twin Bee*-style system of colour-coded power-ups, which are finite and have to be used sparingly. Buy it from the above link (author Anthony Flack's website) and he gets more commission.

GRIDRUNNER++

www.llamasoft.co.uk



Completed as a personal project before he began work on impending opus *Unity*, Jeff Minter updated his own 8bit classic for the mouse-savvy generation. Brutally addictive. One mouse, one button, shoot lots of relentlessly hostile everyday objects and icons, collect sheep to boost bonus multiplier. Minter at his most relaxed and accessible.

drops out'. In the end, it actually delayed the *PGR2* schedule, because the artists were playing it when they should have been modelling cities."

"I think that homebrew games do have a place in mainstream gaming," says *PGR2* associate producer **Chris Pickford**. "To give the player a break from the usually complex main game. But I don't see us accepting submissions from the public just yet. Anything like *Geometry Wars* we do in the future will have to be made in-house."

In the movie industry, bigger studios take profits from their major releases to support smaller projects. The games biz big boys could be about to follow, with heartening noises out of Microsoft about Xbox Arcade – a branch of Xbox Live which plans to offer small games for download at around $12 each. Ideal for gamers who fancy a more immediate, arcadey hit as a bit of relief from faffing around with *Full Spectrum Warrior*.

If, as a game designer, you want to react against the current obsession with realism, knocking up a quick shoot 'em up is clearly the way to go. There's no language barrier (shoot scary things, avoid bullets) and you can be completely abstract and play up to all kinds of wild artistry. While most sophisticated commercial games dump a chunky interface of demands between the player's thought and action, a good shooter always keeps it open-ended and pure. Again, it comes back to the freedom thing. As PomPom's Michael says, "Shooters are about survival with minimal rules. They're anti-realism, because there aren't any physical laws. You can create your own physics. Why bother bowing to the usual imitations of gravity, when you can be free to do whatever you want to do?" 

INTENSITY XS

www.midnightsynergy.com/intensity



Slick and traditional horizontal scroller from the well-established Midnight Synergy stable. Plenty of nods to *Gradius* in the power-up/power-down system. Slow to start, but builds to live up to its name on later levels.

TSUNAMI 2010

www.uni-ulm.de/~s_cwaech/Games.htm



Technically impressive remake of Minter's *Tempest 2000* aimed at audiences without access to Atari Jaguars. Plenty of flair – and a nice option to let you use your own mp3s – but *T2K* purists will notice the absence of Minter's trademark: a taut game design engine purring away beneath the pyrotechnics. Also, designer Apocalypse Inc. sought Minter's approval – which wasn't given. It went ahead, anyway. A good job, soured by lack of mutual respect.

THE BUTTERFLY EFFECT

Splinter Cell Chaos Theory, Sam Fisher's third mission, is his most ambitious yet. We made our way across to Canada to find out how Ubisoft plans to substantially evolve the series

There is usually a moment on a press trip, typically just after you first enter your hotel room after a transatlantic flight, when you wonder whether the game you've come to see is worth the countless miles travelled. This time, however, there's no such instant of contemplation because the answer is to be found lying on the room's desk. Ubisoft has kindly arranged for a *Splinter Cell* 'goodie bag' to be delivered but, unexpectedly, it's the hotel directory next to it that has boosted our jetlagged confidence regarding the quality of Sam Fisher's latest mission. In it, the hotel's general manager has personally signed the introductory note – twice, in fact, given that the guide is in both French and English. And that's for each of the hotel's 258 rooms.

This level of attention to detail extends beyond Montreal's hotels and, more relevantly, has been particularly characteristic of recent projects to emerge from Ubisoft's Canadian operation. Established in 1997, Ubisoft Montreal now houses 900 employees in 150,000 sq ft arranged over three vast labyrinthine floors of an old textiles factory. It is, it proudly boasts, the world's second largest development studio. It has its own gym, several recreational areas, and each of its kitchen units comprises nine microwave ovens and three US-sized fridges to cater for its ostensibly committed staff.

One group of employees that has certainly been making regular use of the culinary facilities since the autumn of 2002 is the original *Splinter Cell* team. (If you're wondering, *Pandora Tomorrow* was co-developed in Shanghai and Montreal, with the Canadian side of the equation providing a dedicated team to only look after that game's multiplayer aspect – a structure it has again employed (see 'Togetherness'). Currently with a headcount of around 150, it's Ubisoft's largest and a convincing indication of the publisher's commitment to the third instalment in its popular stealth franchise. For *Chaos Theory*, the company is addressing issues both press and public had regarding the previous two iterations, while attempting to push the concept of stealth further and evolving the *Splinter Cell* universe by enhancing the player experience.

"One of our ambitions was to make this game a little more massmarket, to get a larger audience by fixing all the frustrations we had in the [first] game," says producer **Mathieu Ferland**, "but also to support the hardcore gamer with the non-linear structure, with all the secondary objectives and opportunity objectives and bonus objectives and all the little details they'll discover when playing the game."

> For Chaos Theory, Ubisoft is addressing issues while attempting to push the concept of stealth further and evolving the Splinter Cell universe

They may sound unconnected, but these elements are related to one another, working together to remove the linear nature so criticised of *Splinter Cell* (which, it emerges during our trip, originally included non-linear aspects that were removed for reasons unknown).

Clint Hocking, creative director, scriptwriter and lead level designer, explains *Chaos Theory*'s approach: "We really wanted to have what I call controlled non-linearity or semi-open topology. The world is open and you can go in any direction at any time but what we have is 'the 80 per cent path'. This concept means



Game: **Splinter Cell Chaos Theory**
Format: **PC, Xbox**
Publisher: **Ubisoft**
Developer: **In-house (Ubisoft Montreal)**
Origin: **Canada**
Release: **November**



Fisher now feels connected to the environment, with a realistic stopping ability and his feet firmly on the ground – not easy to achieve; Montreal claims to be the first developer to have realised this

that the level designer builds the map in accordance with the script and with the design objectives of the game, and he plans out these ten or 12 areas and how they're topologically interconnected. He plans the path he wants the player to take, and this is the path he focuses most on. If there are other paths available, that's fine, but we need to make sure that the path that the designer designs and spends the lion's share of his effort on is the path that 80 per cent of the players take. The non-linear paths are still there, but they are really intended more for the hardcore players, for the repeat players to add replay value."

One particular example, a Tokyo bath house brimming with guards, allows two main routes through (with the occasional sub-path thrown in) and while both encourage Fisher's trademark considered stealth infiltration method, it's promising to be able to test the developer's claims that the game can now also be played in more conspicuous fashion. "Just because we're encouraging and rewarding the player to play stealthily doesn't mean the game doesn't support action," Ferland offers. "Sam now carries a shotgun for those specific sequences where there's lots of firefights, and we've been developing the AI so the fight sequences are much more attractive and relevant."

More on the AI in a moment. Levels are now more structurally complex and offer a multiple-path system. Players can make decisions about game flow, but by implementing a series of objectives in addition to the multi-path approach the developer can, to a certain extent, still control the player's actions. While primary and secondary objectives are obviously mission-specific, opportunity objectives take the form of, say, planting bugs on six telephones – they're not heavily story focused but serve as a balancing and guidance tool for the developer to invite gamers into most of the map's areas. Similarly, bonus objectives reward the meticulous player who is prepared to explore the environment in minute detail. One interesting addition is the inclusion of 'fallback' objectives, which only come into effect once the mission has gone wrong and serve as a way of reducing the number of what previously would have resulted in game-over situations.

"Sam now carries a shotgun for those specific sequences where there's lots of firefights, and the fight sequences are much more attractive"

New intelligence

Your opponents, on the other hand, will be looking to increase such circumstances. The AI has been completely rewritten and now uses navigation meshes rather than navigation points of *SC1*. In addition, NPCs benefit from increased environmental awareness including mirror and shadow detection, contextual search animations (such as looking over a railing) and memory, rather than going back to an 'idle' mode

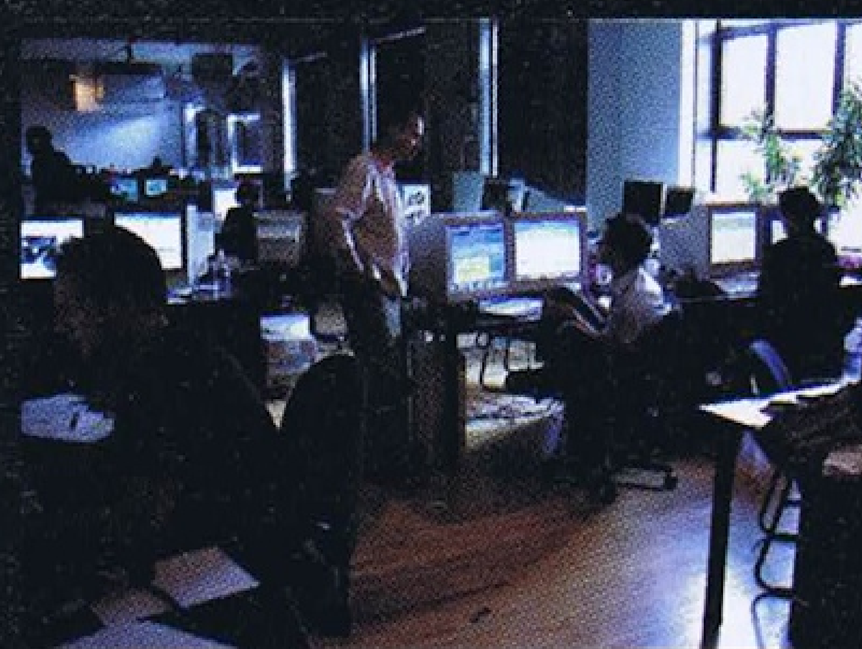
TOGETHERNESS

A particularly promising inclusion in *Chaos Theory* is the twoplayer cooperative game (on or offline) that has been worked on by a separate team at Ubisoft Montreal since February. The limited development time has resulted in only four maps being offered, although, if the mode proves popular, expect more via download. "There's no way that it was possible to recycle the singleplayer maps," explains associate producer **Stephane Roy**. "The designers didn't have it in their minds that it was for two players, so that's why my team is working uniquely on that – and it makes a difference. Occasionally in coop titles you get the feeling that they've just added another character but it's the same architecture and the same environment. I guarantee that with the maps we've created you cannot finish it alone – you must be with your friend."

The game essentially plays the same as in singleplayer but with the addition of coop moves (such as throwing your colleague over an infra-red beam, climbing up the side of a building, standing on his shoulders while shooting over a wall) and they are the aspect Roy is proudest of: "We give you the feeling that you are doing something special, that you have access to some areas that you are not supposed to. It's because of these moves that the game and level designers can design some very nice structures. Tons of new possibilities exist."

In play, coordinating strategies offer an attractive new dynamic on the *Splinter Cell* gameplay although admittedly the coop moves, while simple in their one-button execution, prove a little cumbersome in terms of set-up and player placement. But a little practice should certainly oil the procedure and the potential for this mode remains thoroughly exciting.







The Montreal-based team is working hard on audio: sound propagation, volumetric sourcing, sound masking and better ambient effects make full use of the game's 5.1 mix





In addition to his usual spectacular array of gadgets, Fisher now carries a knife, allowing for the display of the game's ragdoll physics model in some of the new close-quarter combat moves

after a set time period. They can perform complex tasks such as teaming up with a fellow NPC to perform searches (and notice if the other goes missing), flanking, and converging around a specific object to communicate with one another.

Furthermore, the developer has included the notion of stress levels, which depend on the number, and nature, of stimuli. "We're thinking that it's very important that the NPC cares about their life," expands lead programmer **Dany Lepage**. "Of course, if they care about their life they're going to be behind cover very often because they're not going to stay in the open and that's going to [make it] difficult for you to kill them." However, Lepage is keen to point out that the team has ways of ensuring the AI isn't so clever as to make the game frustratingly difficult, such as limiting their accuracy and cone of vision: "I think they're going to be much more interesting opponents. You're going to have to think a lot more to get the same result because the behaviour is going to be different depending on what you do – they're going to have a strategy that will adapt quickly to what you're doing and you'll need to use something different to get rid of them." To prove the point, Lepage demonstrates a firefight between Fisher and a soldier who appears impressively sharp in his use of surroundings for cover. In practice, we find the enemy's perception level to be a little overenthusiastic, with the slightest look around a corner resulting in immediate detection, but the team readily admits there is still fine-tuning to be done.

Which seems like an appropriate time to leave them to it. In terms of atmosphere (the combined result of standard-setting animation, graphics, audio and AI, plus a novel coop mode), *Splinter Cell Chaos Theory* is a determined leap forward for the franchise and, potentially, the stealth genre as a whole. It's not quite there yet, but come November you'd expect the detail-obsessed Ubisoft Montreal to deliver something special.





MEMORABLE MOMENTS

Chaos Theory feels darker than previous *Splinter Cell* games. It's a lot to do with the team's approach. "We don't want to push the realism any further than we did, but we did want to up the emotional stakes in the game. One of the ways to do that is to add a bit of an edge to it," Hocking says. This emotional connection centres on the notion of tension, arguably the main emotional experience in a stealth game. As tension within a stealth dynamic is inherently linked to enemy proximity, the team has engineered the game both in terms of objectives and AI behaviour to deliver such situations, while also providing a new close-range attack system.

Equally, the storytelling element has undergone a revision. A dynamic dialogue system takes into account previous events and player choices (necessary given the game's non-linear leanings) and the use of in-game cut-scenes has been removed and replaced by what the developer is terming 'memorable moments'. Developed with a Hollywood specialist, these incidents aim to inject drama into the game while allowing the player to maintain camera control and thus promote a more involving experience. "We're trying to look for ways to create the emotions that you feel when you experience traditional drama," says Hocking.

One example includes the shadow of a man undergoing electric-shock torture being projected on to a wall you approach early on in the level which, when combined with game's excellent audio quality, leaves little to the imagination. Hocking again: "I think it's more challenging and again much riskier to invite the player to feel something dramatically and emotionally compelling than it is to just yank away the camera and force him to watch it."





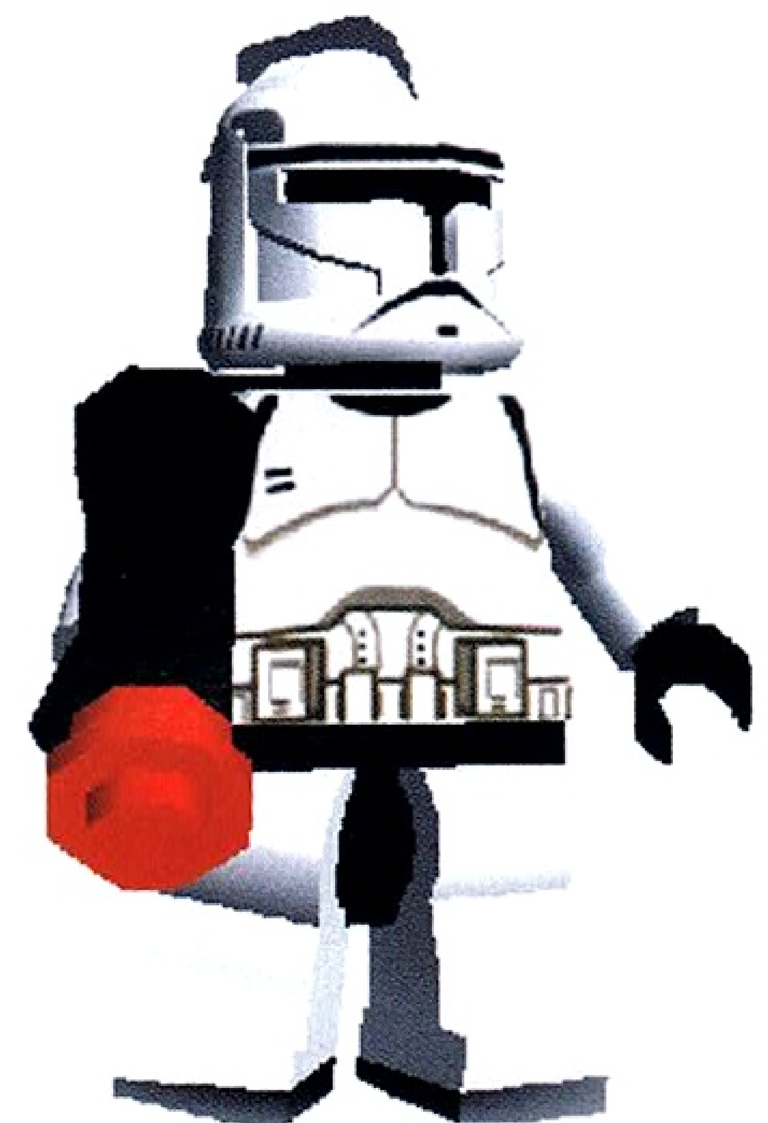
Fisher's revised arsenal allows inventive players more freedom when it comes to negotiating levels – you can disable a guard by discharging an electrical blast into the water puddle he's standing in

May contain small parts

Lego Star Wars, from startup publisher Giant Entertainment, is blending two extraordinarily beloved entertainment universes into something new…





To begin, a line of Lego trivia. The word Lego comes from the Danish 'Leg Godt', meaning to play well. That is the Lego philosophy – playing well – and that confident quality oozes from almost everything the Danish manufacturer has branded since its inception. To continue, a cheap shot. Lego videogames have not (traditionally) played well. Star Wars games, too, have forged an unenviable reputation recently, apart from a certain RPG. So, from an **Edge** reader's point of view at least, *Lego Star Wars* finds itself in a peculiar situation from the start: two powerful licences, each theoretically tailor made for videogames, each a blessing and each a curse.

It's likely, then, that that an **Edge** reader will have come to this part of the magazine last of all, regardless of how much they've loved Lego, loved Lucas. Why blame them? What could they expect from a journey through the first three films that, according to the developer's mission statement, has been made for children? It's not for them, right? **Jonathan Smith**, development director at the game's publisher, Giant Entertainment, answers without missing a beat. "You're talking about a





















Lego 'studs' are enormously evocative, and they work well as an interaction signifier. It's hard to look at the bigger ships without wanting to prise apart the bricks and rebuild

Game: Lego Star Wars
Format: PC, PS2, Xbox
Publisher: Giant Ent.
Developer: Traveller's Tales
Origin: UK
Release: 2005



By using the force (mapped to circle on the PS2 pad) Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon can take Lego objects and reconstruct them. The new structures may be important to progress, or simply give access to power-ups or extra areas

hardcore, seen-it-all-before gamer? This is *exactly* what they want. They *haven't* seen it before." Interesting. Just suppose he's right.

You – you – may not have seen *Lego Star Wars* before in a very literal sense, either. The game had a low-key public unveiling at the San Diego comic convention at the end of July to no small amount of surprise and excitement, the hype snowball taking its first few tumbles down the mountainside. Recounting all the major events in the modern trilogy, and due for release just before 2005's Revenge Of The Sith, superficially it's a straightforward game – a series of thirdperson fixed-camera adventures through landmark set-pieces, instantly recognisable environments populated with heart-warming lego structures, circular studs and the tiny minifig Star Wars characters.

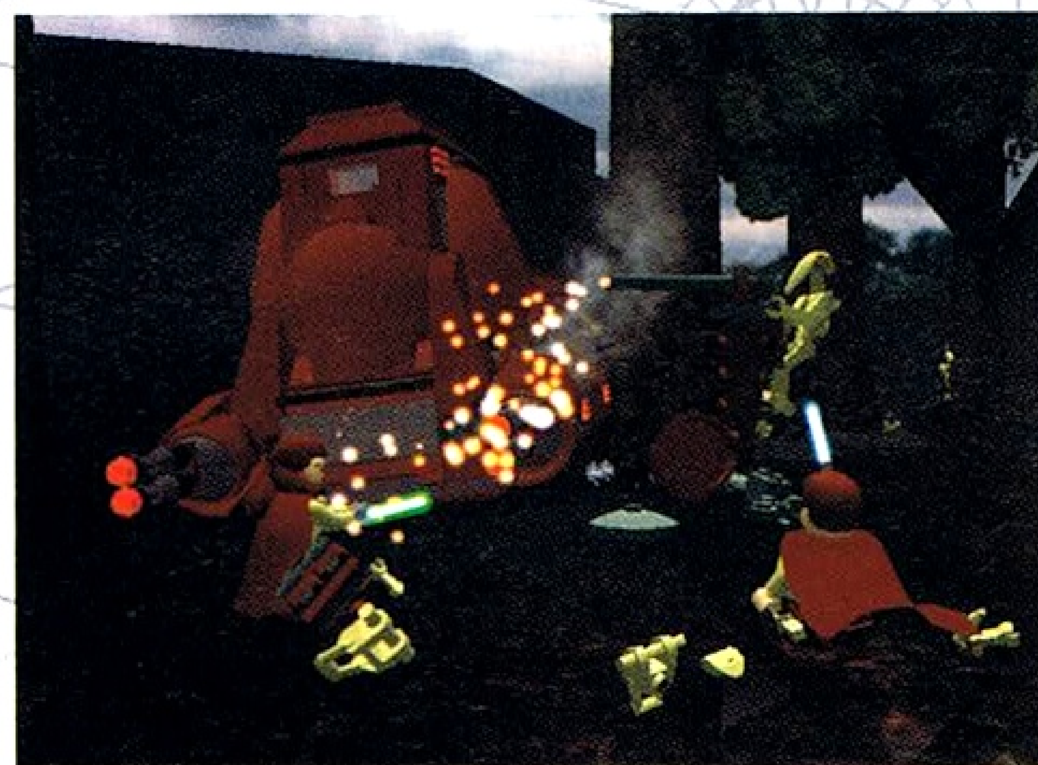
Investigate further, though, and the game's linear handholding melts away, replaced by a freeform friendliness that encourages exploration and experimentation. While the levels are compact from start to finish, the idea is that players who want to spend more time playing in the environments are provided with enough toys to play with. Lego pieces act as interaction signifiers within the playfield – Jedi can attempt to manipulate Lego bricks with the force or smash things with their sabers; robots will pull



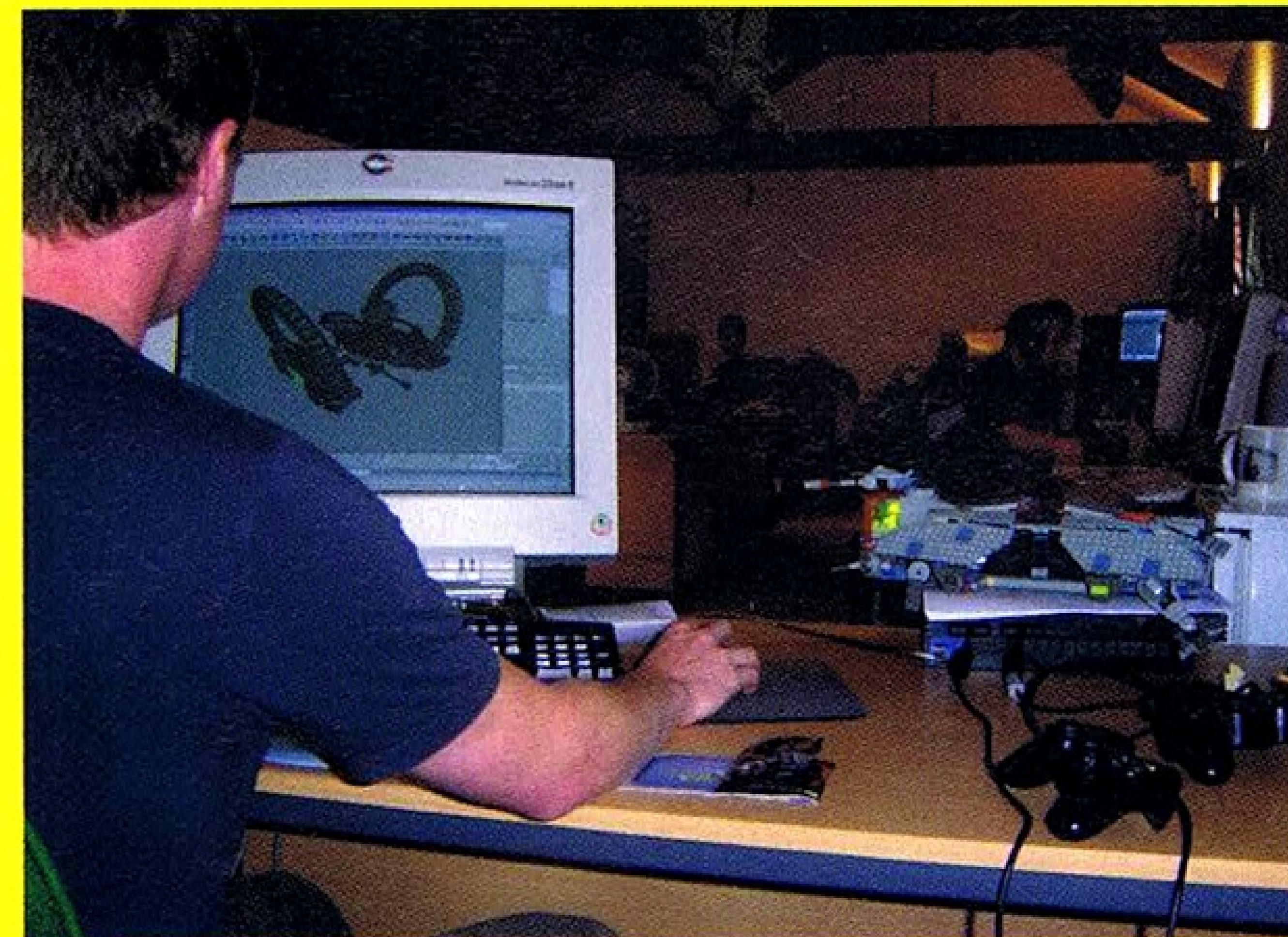






Construction complete



The ship models in *Lego Star Wars* are recreations of their Lego kit counterparts. Better than that, they're constructed out of virtual versions of single separately built bricks, meaning Traveller's Tales has essentially turned Maya into an infinitely large Lego kit. "It makes it building models a lot easier," explains lead artist **James Cunliffe**. "Slave-1, to build, is an afternoon. Building a new spaceship out of regular polygons would take a whole lot longer." Most of the ships are built out of similar bricks, since reusing odd pieces from previous kits is a source of pride in the Lego design community. You'll find the wing panel from one ship might have had a previous life as a spoiler on an F1 car, and that's a technique that Cunliffe is continuing in the videogame's new Lego creations. "One of the droids I built this week has a telephone that are his eye sockets, effectively," he explains. Convergence taken to extremes, that.

The point is that if it's made from Lego you can play with it. And when you realise that, you realise what's fundamentally different about this Lego game

and push Lego levers; and royal guards will shoot the cutest laser pistols ever, or use grappling hooks to reach higher platforms. There are many more characters and many more ways of manipulating the environment, but the point is that if it's made from Lego you can play with it. And when you realise that, you realise what's fundamentally different about *this* Lego game. It's about transferring the Leg Godt philosophy into videogaming, not taking a videogame and colouring it with bricks.

Smith explains how that concept came about: "It started with the idea that Lego could make a great computer game. There was something in that fantastic experience of playing with Lego that we all know about, that could be brought to the world of videogames that we all love. That could match. That could create something new – that could draw on what was in Lego, but take it into a new place."

But why bring Star Wars into it? "The thing with Star Wars meant that we could bring the world's favourite characters into that idea, and create something that would be extremely accessible, attractive, exciting. Lego's range of Star Wars play materials has been one of the most successful ranges of toys for the Lego toy company. Much loved by us, much loved by everyone we know, by many millions of people throughout the world. So the next question was what would the *Lego Star Wars* game be? What are all these great vehicles, all these great characters, scenes from movies that we live out when we play with the toys, what would that be like in a videogame?"

So Lego brings the structure and Star Wars brings the universe. Interestingly, though, just as Lego's designers have been allowed to experiment with the vehicles in the universe themselves – check the back of any Star Wars Lego set and you'll find other, non-Lucas creations that can be built with the same pieces – so *Lego Star Wars* turns the cinematic story into a playset. As players progress through the game they unlock characters, and these characters can be taken back into previous scenes. By combining their unique skills with those of the characters already present in the level it's possible to reach new areas in a gameplay twist that may remind some of *The Lost Vikings* on a grander scale.

Slice slice, baby



Star Wars wouldn't be Star Wars without some saber slicing and laser swooshing, and *Lego Star Wars* doesn't shy away from either. Jedi have lightsabers with which they can perform simple, single-button combos, each of the fighters having their own particular moveset. Holding down the attack button will block, while laser blasts can be reflecting back at opponents with well-timed swipes. Other player characters have different methods of attacking their opponents, including R2D2's strangely satisfying ability to disable droids. "I think that as soon as you pick it up it has immediate playability," says Pardon.



Jango Fett is one of the developers' favourite characters. Like the rest of *Lego Star Wars'* cast, he's beautifully animated – watch his tiny body recoil in mid air as he hovers and fires his pistols, or the little flourishes as he spins

Also of note is the 'drop in, drop out' two player dynamic, which allows a second player to enter or leave the action on a whim. There are always between two and six possible player characters on screen, and pressing Start drops player two into one of their bodies. If they'd rather play a different part they can approach their choice of host and transfer their spirit with the triangle button. The same goes for player one, of course, which is how they can solve the multi-character multi-skill puzzles. The AI of the rest of the party is smart enough but it's essentially static, not progressive – it will do the minimum required to keep itself alive, and shadow your progress through the level intuitively, but it won't solve puzzles or rout enemies.

With such a strong emphasis on a wide range of characters, much thought was put into how the instantly recognisable Lego minifigures were to be recreated in a game. Initially animated in a similar fashion to the comedic (funny-cos-they're-rubbish) Lego stop-motion videos that pop up across the internet from time to time, Traveller's Tales soon decided on something more organic. "It was pretty obvious we weren't really going to be able to stick with plastic," explains **Jeremy Pardon**, *Lego Star Wars'* lead animator. "That worked better, creating characters rather than just copying the minifigs. I mean, there were technical problems anyway – the plastic was built to work and function in a certain way, which as a character it doesn't necessarily do. A good example is if you open their legs, they actually have something in the middle, and it starts to look… ummm…"

Lego Star Wars' minifigs have a sort of flexibility that's absent from the figures on which they're based, knee joints flexing as if the legs were made of soft rubber, plastic hairstyles flopping comically with their owners' motion. The painted-on facial expressions are beautifully animated, too. If other Lego games have shown how Lego would look if animated with Thunderbirds-style strings, this is Lego done by Pixar, flexible and emotive, almost inevitable when you consider that the team's last game was *Finding Nemo*.

If other Lego games have shown how Lego would look if animated with Thunderbirds-style strings, this is Lego done by Pixar, flexible and emotive

"Actually, when we started, we hadn't even finished *Nemo*, had we?" grins Pardon. "And we were doing the first demo of the game. My producer on *Nemo* wasn't very happy. There were a few weeks left on that project, just kinda fixing bugs and stuff, but we were all so excited at the new project, at the prospect of being able to play with Lego basically, that we just cracked on and built… well, we had half a dozen characters, a speeder bike, stormtroopers. Helped by lots of Lego."

How did the Lego designers react when they first saw their creations moving? Smith interrupts. "They were just blown away, everyone, right from the start, right from the first minifigure they saw move around. Everyone just said: 'That is 100 per cent right'." Was that because they had pretty low expectations? "They had no expectations. None whatsoever, because they didn't know what we were going to do. At all.

"But the results were spectacular, and proved what we'd been hoping for: that these characters could come to life as videogame characters. That the world in the imagination of a child or adult – becoming a child for a moment as they play with the



It's not all platforms and puzzling – here, one of the movies' key sequences is recreated as a linear shooter, while the famous pod racing also has a Lego equivalent

Lego and live out that story – could come to life in a really cool way."

If you want an illustration of exactly how cool that cool way is, take the short, sharp cut-scenes. Linking the action, they compress Lucas's newly verbose storytelling into tiny, expression-filled silent movie-style bulletins. At the end of Episode One – and this is spoiler territory for those who've been living in a hole for five years, so beware – Darth Maul's final, fatal fight with Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan is jammed into 20 seconds of supercute lightsaber dancing. When Maul falls, split asunder at the waist into his two minifig parts just as a real Lego minifig would, you can see just how well they've captured the essence from both universes – the joy from one, the character from the other – and have created a third.

Or, as Smith explains, it's about ignoring theoretical convention and returning to Leg Godt: "If this was a mission to clone those plastic toys and represent them in a videogame, we would have all kinds of challenges from a technical perspective, to try and make that fun. But the mission, right from the start, was to say: 'What's the game of Star Wars Lego going to be like? What, in that currently existing plastic world, can we draw upon to make that game?' But if new stuff needs to be created to bring characters to life in this imaginative world, we are at liberty to make those changes. The Lego ethos is bigger than any one particular representation."

That's difficult to disagree with. But how will Giant persuade **Edge** readers that this is the one? That this is really, actually, genuinely going to play well? Smith's three-stage answer is simple. Stage one: "We would show it to them." Stage two: "And they would play it." Stage three: "And they would enjoy it."

Right now, we've got no reason to suppose he's wrong.











From left: Giant Entertainment's managing director Tom Stone, development director Jonathan Smith, and Loz Doyle, producer on *Lego Star Wars*

EDGE®

SUBSCRIPTION ORDER FORM



Yes
I would like to subscribe to EDGE starting with the next available issue

1. YOUR DETAILS

TITLE ☐ MR ☐ MRS ☐ MS ☐ MISS

Name________________________________

Address________________________________

____

State________________ Postcode________________

Email________________________________

Telephone (inc. area code)________________________________

☐ Tick if you do not wish to receive information about special promotions from Derwent Howard and carefully selected partners.

in 25 words or less: which show you could watch for 60 hours straight & why

Answer:________________________________

____

2. PLEASE TICK ONE BOX

AUSTRALIA

☐ One payment of $79.95 for 12 issues

NEW ZEALAND

☐ One payment of $103.95 for 12 issues

3. METHOD OF PAYMENT

☐ Cheque/Money Order (Aust. only) Please make payable to Derwent Howard Pty Ltd.
(AUD$ drawn on an Australian bank account)

☐ Mastercard ☐ Visa ☐ Bankcard

Card No

☐☐☐☐ ☐☐☐☐ ☐☐☐☐ ☐☐☐☐

Expiry date ☐☐/☐☐

Cardholder name (PLEASE PRINT) ________________________________

____

Signature ________________ Date________________

Order Code: EDGE2

DERWENT HOWARD Offer ends: 16 November, 2004

FREE POST:
Derwent Howard, Reply Paid 1037, Bondi Junction, NSW 1355

12 ISSUES FOR $79.95!



SAVE OVER $25 OFF THE COVER PRICE!

12 issues for $79.95

SAVE over $25 off cover price!

1. Information on how to enter, forms part of the terms and conditions of entry. To enter the competition, you must answer in 25 words or less: "which show I could watch for 60 hours straight and why". Eligible participants are required to provide their name, address, postcode and telephone number to complete their entry as well as subscribing to any of the magazines referred to below. 2. Entry is open to all permanent residents of Australia and New Zealand when subscribing to the November issue of Edge, PC Games Addict, T3 and What DVD magazines and the October issue of Australian Developer magazine. 3. It is a game of skill and chance plays no part in determining winners. 4. The judges' decision is final and no correspondence will be entered into. Prizes cannot be transferred. Prizes cannot be redeemed for cash. 5. The judging for the competition will take place on December 1, 2004, at Derwent Howard Magazines, Level 3, 75 Grafton Street Bondi Junction NSW. 6. The promoter will not be held liable for any late, lost or misdirected mail. 7. Employees and the immediate families of the promoter and the agencies and companies associated with the promotion are ineligible to enter. 8. The winners will be notified by telephone, post or email. 9. Prize values are the recommended retail value as provided by the supplier and are correct at the time of printing. All prize values are in Australian dollars. 10. The promoter shall not be liable for any loss or damage whatsoever that is suffered (including but not limited to direct or consequential loss) or for any personal injury suffered or sustained in connection with any prize/s, except for any liability that cannot be excluded by law. 11. The competition commences on September 22, 2004 and concludes on November 17, 2004, with last mail received. 12. All entries become the property of the promoter. 13. Prizes and values are as follows: 5 x Topfield TF5000PVRt @ $1,099 each. 14. The promoter is: Derwent Howard Magazines, ABN 400 958 728 89, of Level 3, 75 Grafton Street Bondi Junction NSW.

Subscribe and have

SUBSCRIBE!

WIN! ONE OF FIVE HARD DISK RECORDERS!



WORTH $1,095!

It's the age old conundrum: you're going out to a major LAN event or down to the local local arcade, and there's two things on TV you want to watch - Which do you choose? Hmm, tricky, but now you don't need to choose – with the Topfield TF5000PVRt you can record both shows at the same time.

The TF5000PVRt is a combined digital set-top box and hard disk recorder with twin TV tuners, so you can save two shows in crystal clear quality simultaneously – no tape required. The 120GB hard disk inside has enough room for 60 hours of high quality footage and can also be used to store MP3 music files or digital photos.

We've got five TF5000PVRt's to give away. All you need do to be in with a chance of winning one is follow the instructions on this page and

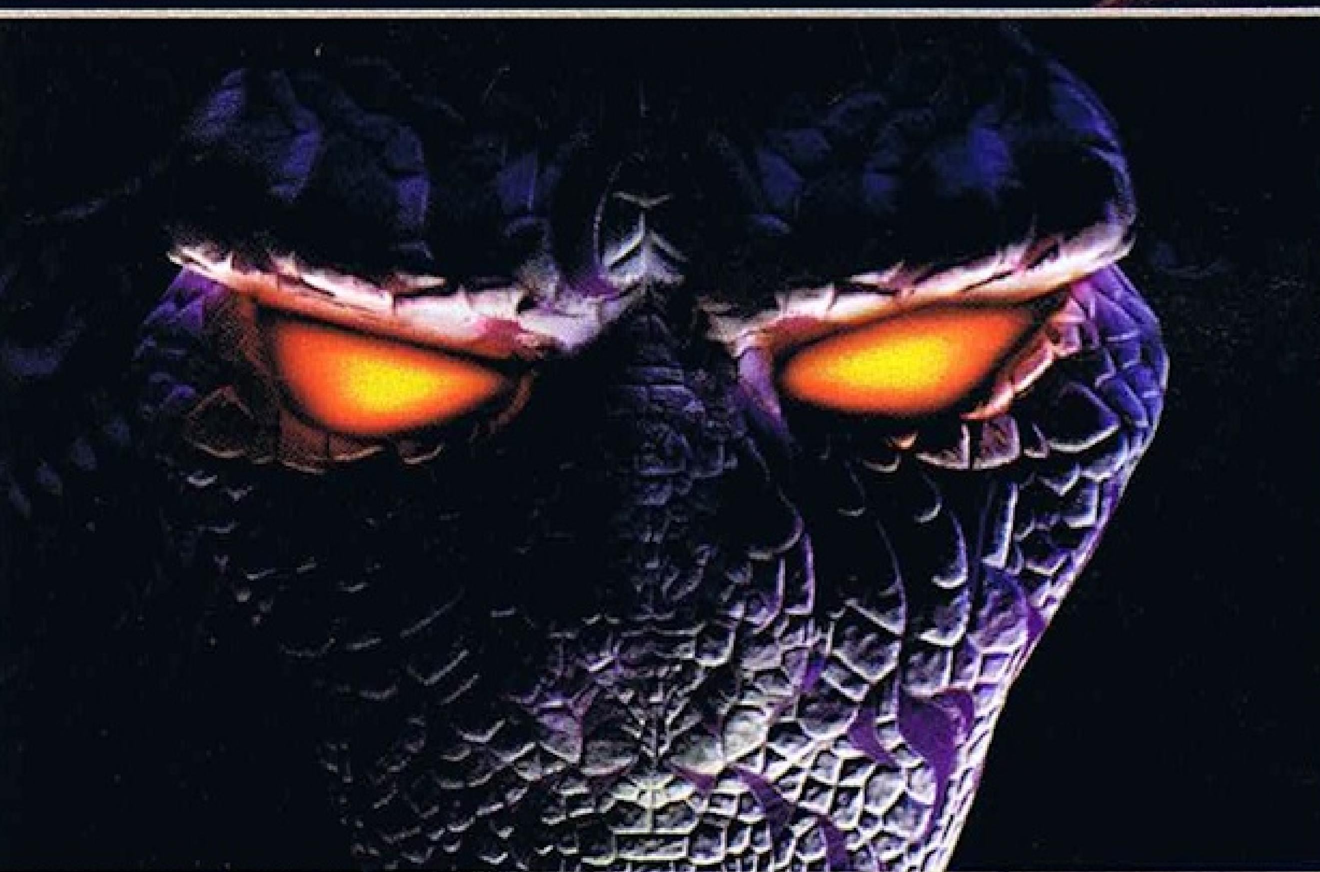
HOW TO ENTER

Fancy the idea of recording two TV shows at once? To be in with a chance on winning a Topfield TF5000PVRt, simply subscribe to Edge magazine using any of the 3 ways to subscribe shown above and tell us, in 25 words or less: which show you could watch for 60 hours straight and why.

3 WAYS TO SUBSCRIBE

- Go to our website: **www.derwenthoward.com.au**
- Call our order hotline: **1800 007 820**
  Lines are open 9AM-5PM Monday – Friday
- Fill in the form & FREEPOST to: **Derwent Howard, Reply Paid 1037, Bondi Junction, NSW 1355**

EDGE magazine delivered to your door for less!











COLD CALLING

Blizzard Entertainment's rise and rise has turned it into a development superpower. We meet three of its key figures to discover how the Diablo creator works its magic

Founded in 1991 by a trio of UCLA graduates with a quietly determined mission statement to 'make great games', the company that would become Blizzard began as the slightly less snappy Silicon & Synapse, a thirdparty SNES and Mega Drive game developer.

Though it enjoyed gentle success, a change of name and change of platform for 1994's PC realtime strategy title *WarCraft* would see that success become more raucous. The reception of *WarCraft 2*, a product of the company's growing house style and confidence, proved monstrously larger than anyone had predicted – It Came From The LAN Party – and from there Blizzard would be defined by a desire to top its own award-scooping performance.

That philosophy would delay sci-fi epic *StarCraft* for two years in response to a subdued E3 reception, during which time dungeon crawl *Diablo* found a global audience as massive as the dial-up internet connection bills it spawned. When a comprehensively reworked *StarCraft* returned in 1998, it was all-conquering – particularly in Korea, where professional *StarCraft* leagues continue to this day.

Blizzard had found its stride: a steady rhythm of release followed by expansion followed by the next, inevitably postponed, release (the company would come to share id's enlightened approach to release dates). The impatience of its fans would be tempered by their dramatic response to the eventual launches, with most recent titles *Diablo 2* and *WarCraft 3* effortlessly topping sales charts – the latter's four million preorders being something of a portent for success.

Now, under a trackless Orange County sky, inside one of Irvine's many outwardly anonymous office blocks, California is dreaming: Blizzard's massively multiplayer debut, *World Of WarCraft*, is four years into development. *StarCraft*'s return is three years in, with a console-only side story. Behind politely closed doors other worlds are no doubt being imagined, too.

Much like its games, Blizzard's office starts out simple and grows intricate. Departure lounge neutrality gives way to a twilight-and-striplight warren of offices, artwork, in-jokes and history: neatly partitioned chaos, familiar as a student dormitory set up for all-night gaming sessions, overwhelming as a Hollywood set designer's interpretation of what a game development studio should look like.

But what's most striking is the profusion of games. Not just Blizzard's own, which naturally take pride of place, but all games – from the coin-ops in the canteen to televisions piled high with consoles to shelves overflowing with jewel cases. A row of box spines reveals legends dating from last month to last decade, evidence that this is a gamer's developer, enthralled by the medium to which it contributes. And intensely aware of that medium, too, in contrast to the impression that Blizzard's liking for privacy might also be isolating.

A day is barely enough time to take it all in. As the staffers we interview will attest, ten years isn't enough to become inured to the strange alchemy resulting from people who care far too much about games creating them for a living.





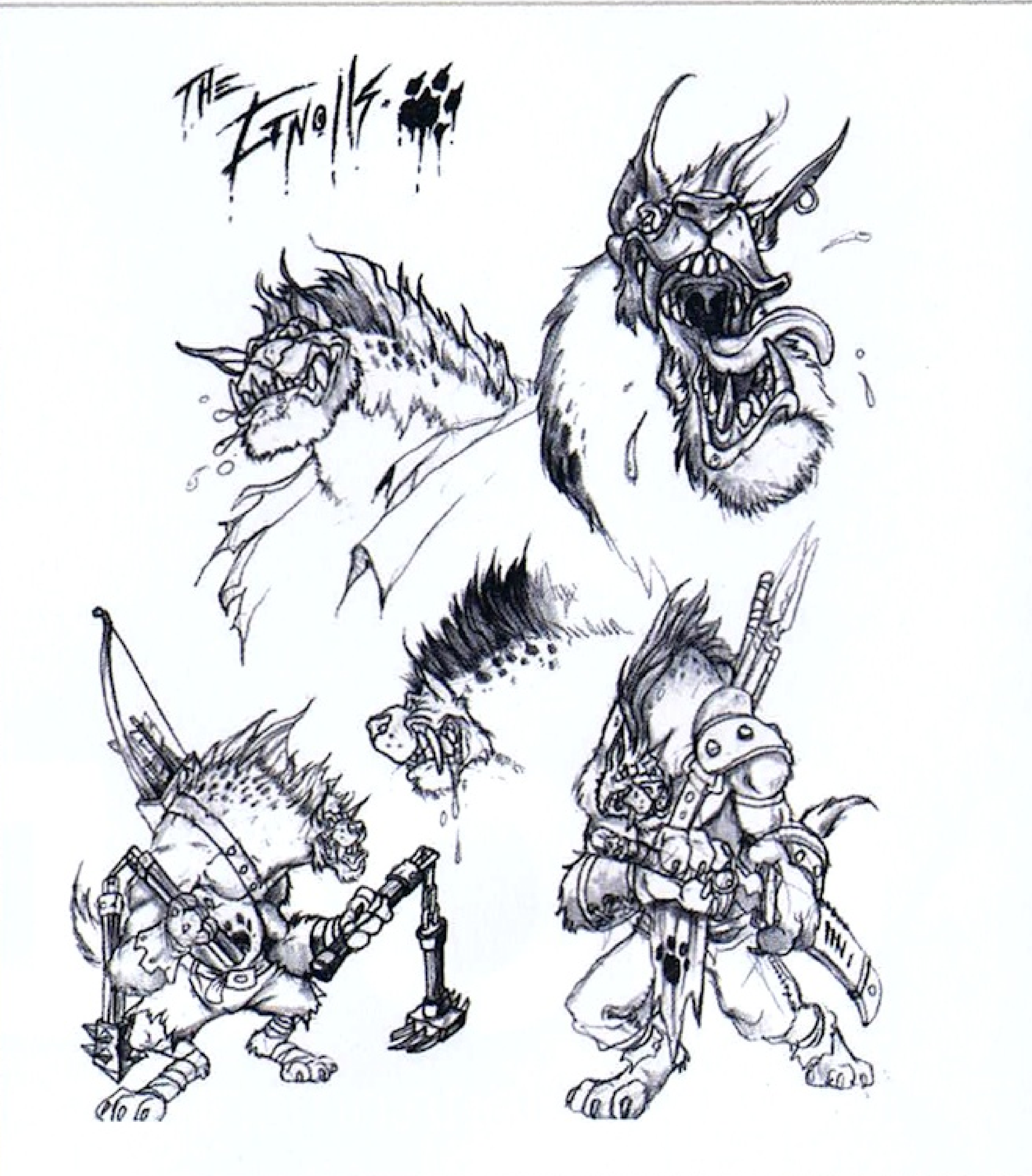






Throughout the building, white space fights a losing battle against inspirational decoration (top, above) or the desire to hoard all Blizzard merchandise ever manufactured (centre)

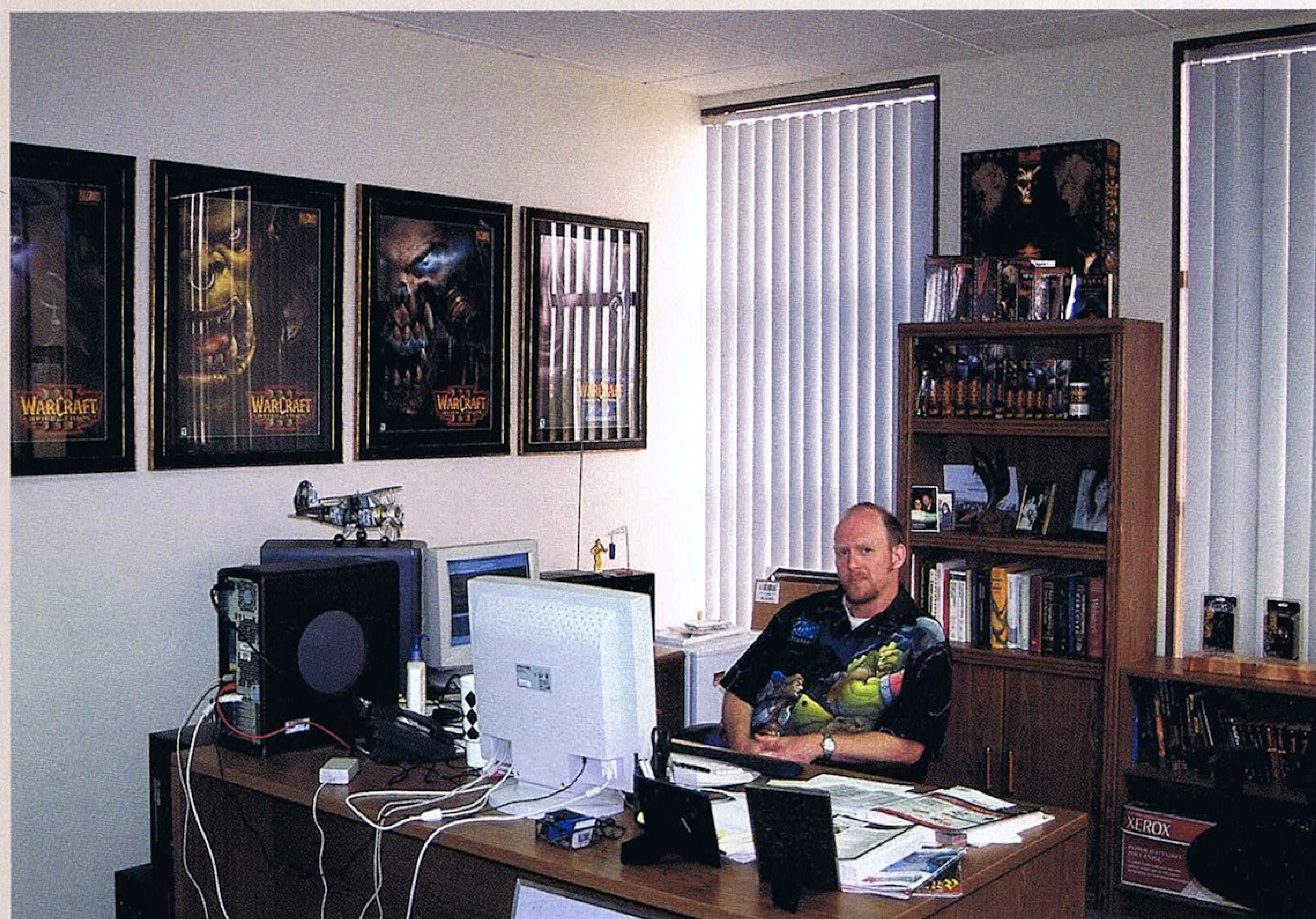






REALTIME BUSINESS STRATEGY

Blizzard's senior vice-president, Frank Pearce



Considering the aloof, number-crunching connotations a vice-president title entails, it comes as a guilty relief that Pearce's office, though presentably managerial, features a life-size sculpture of Orcish antihero Thrall looming over the table at which we're seated – and another that **Frank Pearce** joins us wearing a smart button-up *WarCraft* shirt.

"Our growth has been quite… challenging," he begins, setting a precedent for gentle understatement our other interviewees will follow. "When we were making SNES titles the dev team consisted of maybe one-and-a-half programmers and three or four artists. Even when we started making PC games, with *WarCraft: Orcs And Humans*, that was with a very small team by today's standards."

A very small team compared to today's Blizzard, also: the mythic resonance of its universes has been mirrored by the company's status as a great American success story. *World Of WarCraft* alone has a core team of 65 developers, but also draws on the 25-strong Blizzard Film cinematic department and an eight-person sound studio, in addition to server-side support teams and a Mac port contingent. The company has also acquired a sister studio, San Mateo-based Blizzard North (developer of the *Diablo* line), which has doubled in size to keep pace with the Irvine office's relentless appetite.

"And that doesn't include tech support," adds Pearce. "On SNES games, obviously, there was no tech support, but when we started PC development we made a conscious decision to provide it ourselves, rather than relying on a publisher – we felt it was the only way it could meet our high standards of quality. We have our own QA group for the same reason."

This combination of self-sufficiency and perfectionism is as characteristic of Blizzard as the production design lavished on its games. It suggests that the imminent move into the massively multiplayer arena – a plastic-packed office already awaits the *WOW* game master staff's arrival, life imitating realtime strategy production queue – is not a leap into unknown territories, but an obvious step forward. Blizzard player support has been traditionally generous, from the free Battle.net matchmaking servers to exhaustive post-release updates.

"It's not just a bullet point for the back of the box: I really view the Blizzard community for each specific game to be a huge feature that adds value to the product. So it's important for us to nurture that community and ensure it has a long lifespan," Pearce says. Regular balance fixes, map downloads – and in the cases of *WarCraft 3* and *Diablo 2*, entirely new content – have ensured Blizzard's back catalogue remains viable years after release.

For all their success in keeping their fanbase tapped into the Blizzard vision, repeating that success internally through the company's exponential growth must require just as much dedication.

"It's certainly a challenge we're facing with 300 people. I don't know everyone in the building; I don't think anyone does," Pearce agrees. Notably, the founders have remained involved at the development level: Pearce has coded on most of the company's titles, and assumed team lead duties on *WC3* during the project.

"I call it 'vertical integration'" – he pauses to chuckle at the business-speak. "On *WC3* not only was I programming, I was the team lead, and in my role at a high level in terms of strategic decisions. I enjoy it a lot, because when I'm working on the code for a game I'm very in touch with the product we're making, in touch with the dev team as opposed to just managing – that's not where I want to be."

A similarly bonding aspect of Blizzard culture is their ethos of collaborative design – while there are set design roles on projects, all members participate in the game's direction.

"We made a decision, as a team, to spend every available working hour on it until it was right. And that took five months, but I think a big factor is the passion everyone has"

"I want to say 'by accident'," grins Pearce when we ask how this came about, "but I'm sure it was a philosophy Allen [Adham, one of Pearce's fellow co-founders] was applying to the way we did things. We had committees, 'strike teams', who would talk about the biggest issues at the time. If you had ideas or opinions you could provide them to the team, and feel that they would objectively represent your feedback. And we still use that model."

The development philosophy most familiar to Blizzard's audience, however, is that of not releasing games 'until they're ready' – a strict regime of quality control that Pearce appreciates is a hard-earned right.

"We're very blessed in that our track record for success gives us a lot of leverage. As long as we can continue to prove that we do what we do very well, then our opinions on how long to hold a game are given a lot of weight. Newer developers probably face issues with milestone payments, publishers leaning on them to get the product done early… There's a constant battle between developers and publishers."

Though the effect of extended development on the finished titles is obvious, with few western developers able to match their finessing and polish, we wonder what effect it has on the teams concerned.

"When we talked about crunching for *WC3*, we wanted to get the game to our fans as soon as humanly possible, and for it to be something we would be proud of," Pearce recalls. "So we made a decision, as a team, to spend every available working hour on it until it was right. And that took five months. It's a difficult process to manage, but I think a big factor is the passion that everyone has here, what they share in terms of a vision for the games."

By nature, the company is an overprotective parent, grilling would-be suitors on its prospects and demanding its franchises are delivered home by 11 – and this has resulted in a somewhat edgy relationship with thirdparties. Infamously, Blizzard's only canned project, *WarCraft Adventures: Lord Of The Clans*, was a thirdparty effort, and more recently *StarCraft: Ghost* has suffered lengthy delays and a change of co-developer.

"It's an area where we've tried to broaden our horizons, and it's probably where we've had the biggest challenges, because we're not as close to the development process," Pearce comments.

Though Pearce won't be drawn on whether the recent arrangement with Swinging Ape Studios will see more Blizzard franchises continuing on console after *Ghost*, we ask if he doesn't feel that the growing online multiplayer community, and the enduring popularity of *Diablo*-homage dungeon hacks, indicate a platform and audience ripe for Blizzard attention.

"Ever since the first *WC* our expertise has been on the PC, so we've stayed true to our expertise. And I look at those titles' success and I don't feel we missed out by focusing our efforts there," says Pearce, "but we've never had a shortage of great ideas for console games – just of people to implement them."



THE ART OF WAR

Blizzard's art director, Samwise Didier

"It's pretty cool seeing how we started as such a small company and grew to be one of the biggest names in the industry," declares **Samwise Didier**, displaying the affability that sees the term 'laid-back Californian' register 7,000 Google hits, "but we're still doing the same thing as when we started – making great games."

Another constant, even across three distinct universes, has been Blizzard's art design: a striking, pulp sensibility that may be an acquired taste, but one acquirable on either side of the Pacific, side-stepping polarisation of appeal to either eastern or western audiences. A recently launched fan art program – selected pieces are featured both on Blizzard's web presence and in the office foyer – draws an impressively global mix of submissions.

"We haven't changed our style since the very beginning. The first orc we ever did, in [1994 platform-action title] *Blackthorne*, was just a little guy chasing after Blackthorne – but we thought, 'Hey, these guys are cool', so we used that character for our orcs in *WarCraft*," says Didier. "Artistically, we've always gone for the same sort of goals: we try to keep everything over-the-top, over-proportioned, and really colourful, then we add in as much 'comic factor' as we can."

Is that the secret of Blizzard art's success, then – tapping the visual language of comic book heroes and villains hardwired into the gaming generation at childhood? "I think we have enough realism to appeal to the people who don't like cartoons, but then we have enough big, bulky green guys to keep the kids who're into comics, into anime. And we try to hit the stereotypes – if you look at *StarCraft*, you've got the redneck marines, you've got the highly intelligent, evolved aliens, you've got the all-devouring bugs. All of the artists here can name all the X-Men, they have their favourite characters from *Street Fighter* and *Samurai Shodown*, it's like a geek squad here." He laughs, then deadpans: "And that's a badge you wear with honour."

Though the style has survived a ten-year stretch intact, the delivery has had to adapt to a rapidly changing gaming landscape, with progressively higher-resolution prerendered sprites finally giving way to full 3D in *WarCraft 3*. "[3D] was sort of new to us back then, and we didn't have a lot of guys," Didier says, "but when *WC3* rolled around people were already doing 3D games, so it was our time to step up and shake off the shackles."

Ironically, the move away from 2D presentation would benefit the transition from original illustration to in-game model: "Back in the day, for *SC*, we'd say, 'We need this type of unit', and we'd just make it, but for *WC3* we concepted the units first and then modelled them after that. We'd sometimes take elements from the drawings and use them for textures – before then, we rarely concepted anything, and that required a lot of reworking."









It's reassuringly difficult to find a section of the office where you can swing a joypad without hitting a games machine. Even more difficult to resist the urge to embrace the *Rampart* cabinet

Blizzard's 3D models would largely retain the personality of their prerendered predecessors, without machine-choking hardware intensity. It seems the heavy lines and primary colours that defined the company's art design have to some degree future-proofed it, emphasising style over polygonal substance.

"If you have strong artwork, more polys can definitely help make it look better, but you can get away with a lot by just having a cool shape," says Didier. "And then the animation is what really carries it – the newest guy on our team has been here five years, so he and the other animators definitely have a feel for the art, and their own ideas are right on."

Such an art-heavy lead, as opposed to technology-driven graphical fidelity, is increasingly unusual in the PC field: we put to Didier that Blizzard is almost running counter to the PC gaming community's fascination with photorealistic rendering.

"Blizzard, in my opinion, has never been an on-the-edge tech company," he says. "People are really pushing to get photorealistic, and drawing photorealistic stuff isn't that fun. It's always the most boring thing to do in art class – 'Go draw a bowl of apples' – when everyone would rather be drawing orcs and warriors and demons and monsters and spaceships and burning stars."

Agreeing on the cosmic unfairness of being assessed on the still life rather than the death knight sketched in the margin, we remark on the divergent approaches to portraying a virtual world seen with *World Of WarCraft* and *EverQuest 2*.

"We wanted to make *WOW* look like a living, breathing world, but a version of the world that's ours," explains Didier. "We've gone for that sort of cartoony feel not necessarily because everyone else is going ultra-realistic, but because it's more fun to draw – there's more colours, there's more dynamic characters, you're not tied to being compared to something that's real."

"Photorealistic stuff is the most boring thing in art class. Everyone would rather be drawing orcs and warriors and demons and monsters and spaceships and burning stars"

And operating under the logic of the fantastic rather than the gloomily practical must allow more interplay between art and game design, especially in an environment that values collaboration as much as Blizzard does.

"It works both ways," Didier agrees. "The designers will have an idea, and we'll all sit there and try to come up with something to make that work, and vice versa: we'll throw up a gigantic bug, or undead Crypt Lord, and they'll be like, 'What are we going to do with *this* guy?' This is a pretty tight company, and everyone works together."

Even with so much history and shared confidence driving the art department, Didier stresses that the new blood is just as important, to challenge, expand and improve the Blizzard style. That's arguably most apparent with the company's cinematic division, who have grown, both in visual scope and filmic technique, into a powerhouse as well-regarded as Square's legions of CG animators.

"In the beginning we were hungry for people – if they could draw a cool picture on blue-lined notebook paper they were in. Now we're big enough where we can still take those people, but we can also get people with industry experience. And the cinematic department have just kept pushing, now it's like watching mini-movies." So is there potential for a full-length Blizzard Film feature? "I hope so," he enthuses. "But they have to get our cinematics for the game done first."

And Didier knows his priorities, as we find when concluding on how important a unified art direction is to the success of Blizzard's titles.

"I think our art is one of the things that help make our games. But no matter how good-looking the game is, if it sucks to play you're not playing it."

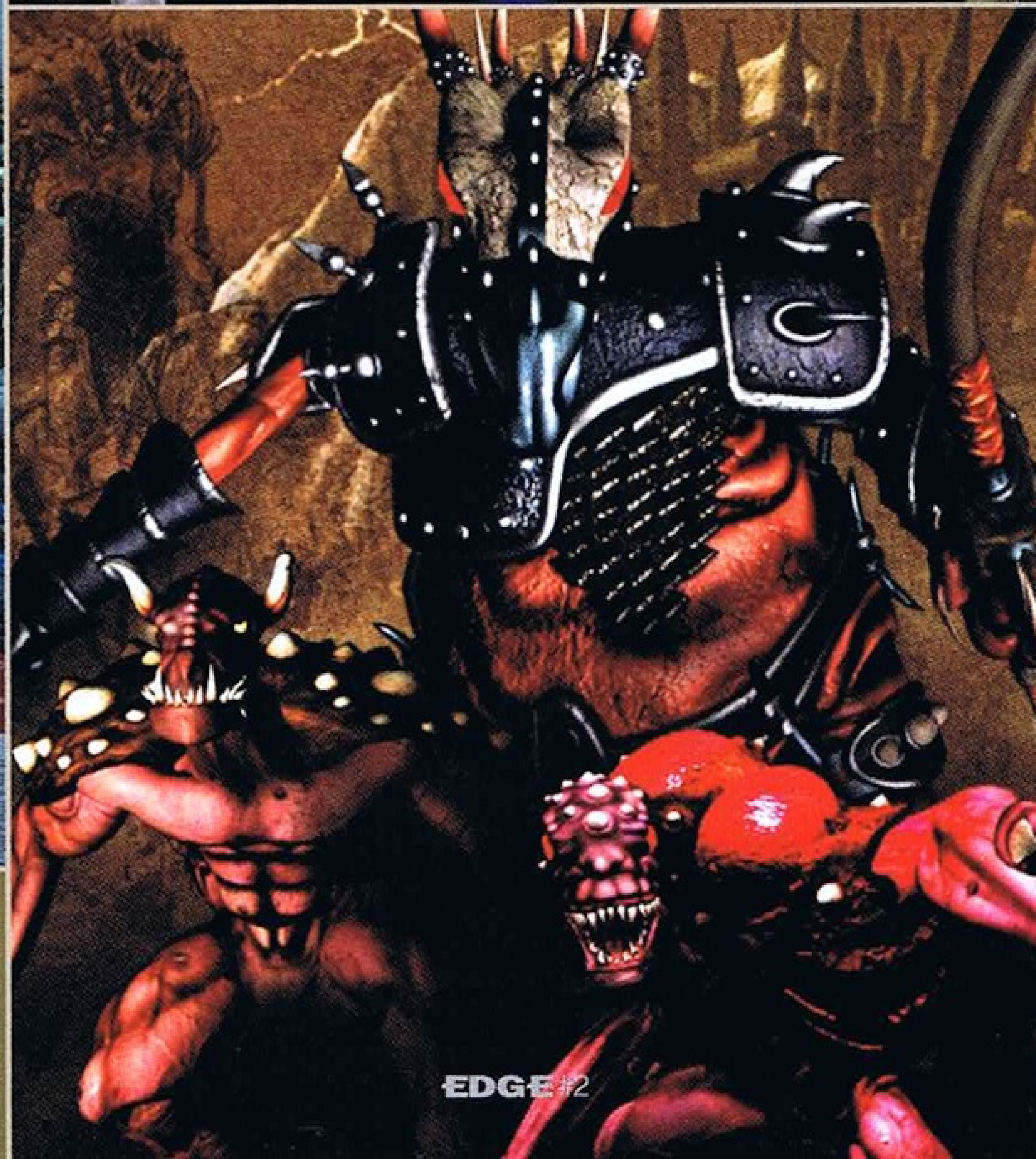
He grimaces, mimes rewinding the recorder, corrects himself: "If it's no good to play, you're not playing it."

'Sucks' works for us, we assure him.



As we spot an 'it's a *StarCraft* thing, you wouldn't understand' photo opportunity, our accompanying Blizzard PR nods understandingly: "Everyone loves to take photos of the fridge"







Blizzard has an aptly solid grasp of the importance of land and resources. We assume the left-hand 'office' – with the *Frozen Throne* standee for a door – is waiting for an upgrade



WORDS OF WARCRAFT

Blizzard's VP of creative development, Chris Metzen

The sheer amount of media in **Chris Metzen**'s office – comics, novels, artbooks, gamebooks, videogames – is almost daunting, threatening to bury him beneath an avalanche of storytelling. But Metzen's own creative output is no less prodigious: his work has created the formative mythos around each of Blizzard's universes.

"I was probably the 15th employee – I started on *Justice League Task Force* for the SNES as an animator," Metzen recalls. "*WarCraft* had turned out to be an unexpected success, and it was around the start of *WarCraft 2* that I stayed late one night and jammed up a three-paragraph summary of what might have happened between *WC* and *WC2*. That got me put on *WC2* as a 'designer'. We didn't know what that role would be at the time: I think the bosses expected it would be making pie graphs, mechanical design, but I just sat there all day making stuff up, and it took off from there."

There's that Blizzard understatement again. With Metzen's extrapolation, *WarCraft* grew from a self-contained battle between two races into an entire continent of clashing cultures, then a world of them.

"I was trying to build a big history based on this small conflict. And with *World Of WarCraft*, you're seeing this little idea from eight, nine years ago bring about this thing infinitely bigger than any of us, with hundreds of people having now forged it and added their vision."

While cultural context would inform the character of *WC* and *StarCraft*'s opposing factions: "Everyone designs the game: we all come up with unit types and powers and construct that chess game, and I'm the guy that plays goalie on whether ideas are appropriate to this race, culture, mechanic," explains Metzen – it was his devotion to backstory that would strike a chord with Blizzard's growing fanbase.

"I grew up with Dungeons & Dragons, as a Star Wars fan, as a comic fan, with their vast continuities. They hooked me so young, and kept providing me with serial instalments of IP that I thought: that's where it's at. I'm always confident we'll build cool, fun games to get people to play – but what if we attempted to construct more of a universe for them, and keep people thinking about them when they're not playing. So that was always the theory. It was hard in practice: I remember the bosses telling me: 'Dude, we need you doing pie graphs, no one cares about this and that – we just want gameplay.' But over time we found people were responding to these geeky details, and it became part of who we are, and how we develop."

"In all videogames there's the pure, visceral, tactile… *hit* of the mechanical flow of gameplay, which is what addicts you in the first place. The secondary element is the immersion"

Accordingly, as the Blizzard universes grew in density, their delivery became more sophisticated. Where *WC2*'s plot was narrated, *StarCraft*'s was to evolve through character-driven drama during the game. The response from players was positive, and the method was refined for *WarCraft 3*'s sweeping story arc.

"Certainly our business is all about gameplay, and the online component of our wargame business is massive, but if we're clever enough and bold enough, there's always ways to make you care," reasons Metzen. "In all videogames there's the pure, visceral, tactile… *hit* of the mechanical flow of gameplay, which is what addicts you in the first place. The secondary element is the immersion, escapism, the fantasy of it. And if you're going to spend 20, 30 hours on a singleplayer game – dammit, it better take you somewhere."

But the people still playing *Diablo 2* are likely more interested in that next super-rare item than being transported to the world of Sanctuary, we pose: are there any regrets that the mechanics ultimately usurp the story, no matter how much effort goes into the latter?

"I don't regret it – that *Diablo* clickfest. 'I get my new stuff in two levels' is the point, after all. If two kids out there" – he pauses, decides to raise his sights – "If *three* kids out there paid attention to the story and were compelled at all, if they read the manual story and thought it was cool, and buy one of these silly novels we put out because they like the universe, then that was the point too.

"That's the coolest thing in the world, if someone wants to read your stories," he continues as we look to the wall-mounted cover art of the novel line. "I just always wanted to see something like [the novels] happen, because growing up with my head in a book, novels legitimise the idea. It's not about 'Let's try and make as much money as possible', it's about seeing people respond to it at that level. And that leads you to suspect you did something right, and then you scrabble to maintain that, and push it further."

Even Metzen isn't sure where that push leads in the wake of *WOW* – after the solidification of all this history into a tangible world, the handover of narrated moments in time to unpredictable, unending virtual life.

"I like to think the series will always go on. It's hard for me to imagine at this point with *WC*, or *SC*, or any licence, what the exclamation mark is at the end of the day. Is there a bigger kind of game to make, and what does that look like? Someone's going to figure it out, and I'm sure we'll put our heads together to look forward in that way."

Is it possible to glance sideways, though, to step back from an ongoing world to continue with self-contained titles?

"[MMOGs] sure change the landscape. I mean, check out what *EverQuest* is doing: their sequel's in the future! The game's still going on, but now you have this new twist predicated off a concept… It makes things really weird. There really is no precedent, I guess is the point."

With our time nearly up, we drop in an unprepared, but burning, six-year question – what was behind *SC*'s frontier western riff, all slide guitar twang and Confederate flags fluttering against prairie sky and starfield?

"To be dead honest with you, I didn't like it at first," admits Metzen. "When we first started jamming on it I had this big space opera idea… the cinematics department had these sequences with backwoods, beer-guzzling yokels, and I'm like [sighs] 'Come on, guys, we're supposed to be selling this classy universe here'. But I loosened up over time, and thought screw it, if you guys think people will respond to this, let's go all the way. That's how the Confederacy happened, although the last thing on my mind was 'This could offend a lot of Southern people: we're stereotyping a massive part of my country'. It all just ended up working. And as we've found on almost every development path, that's the magic, when it's contentious, because it forces you to step up creatively and make the concept work."

He leans back in his chair for the first time in the interview. "That's the beauty of game development: having 60 people making decisions by committee."



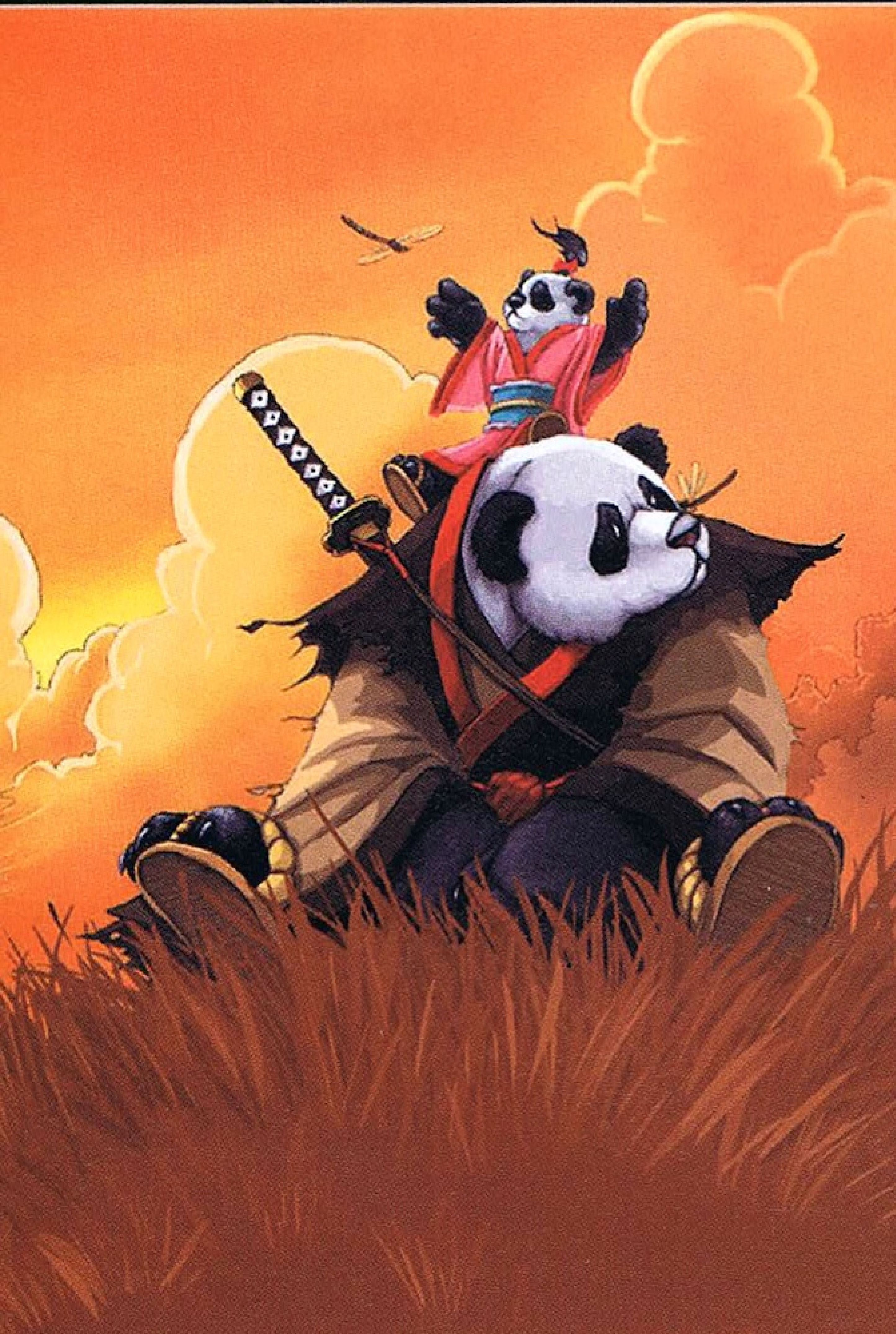


















The Korean *StarCraft* merchandising (centre) explains all those crushing defeats on private Korean servers – if we'd been washing down *SC* crisps with *SC* pop in our *SC* trainers, we could have won



Beauty of the beast

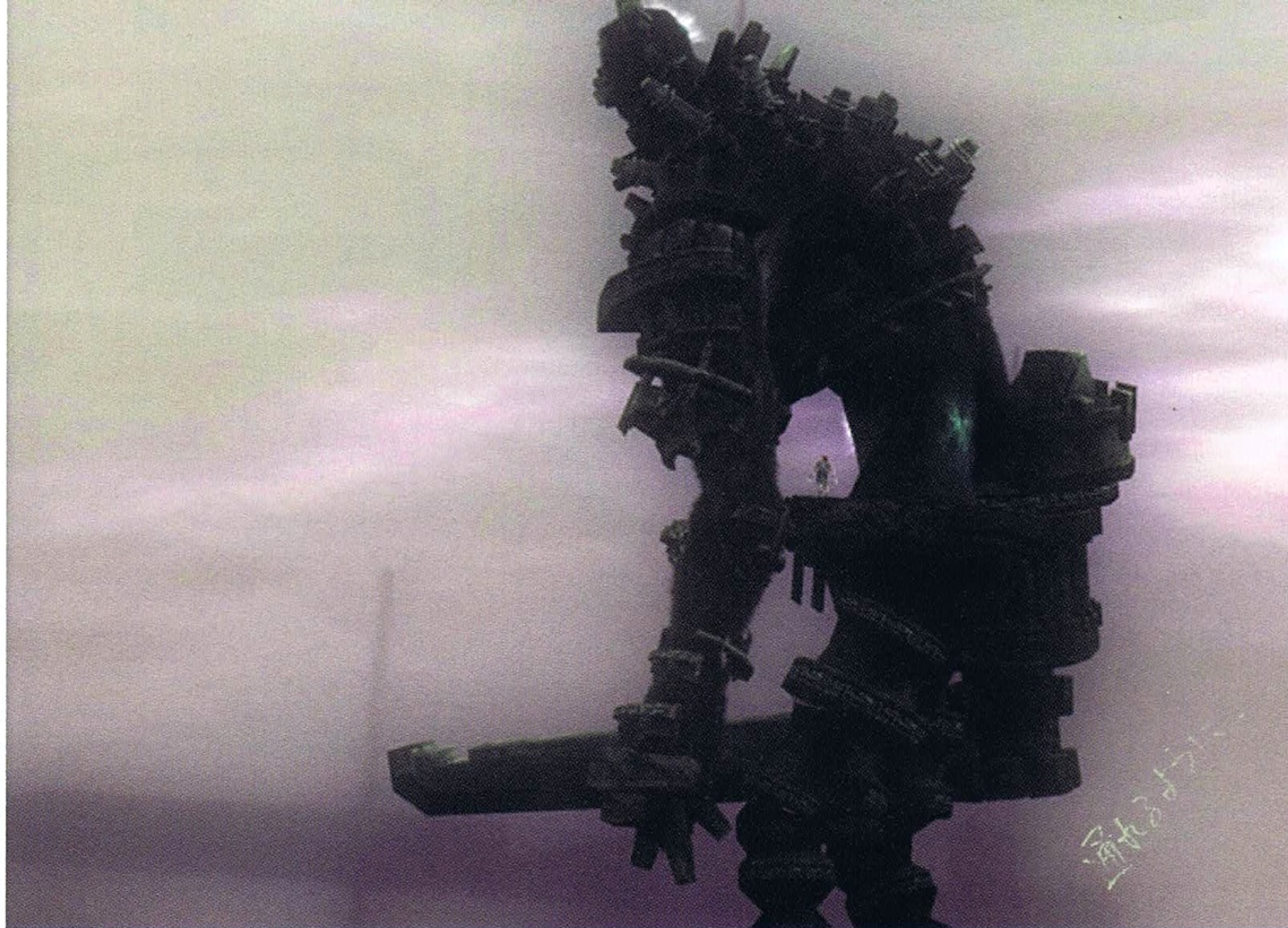
It has been the stuff of rumour for years, but now its creators are ready to talk. Enter the sequel to Ico

The fairytale version reads like this: in late 2001, SCEI's *Ico* was published in Japan with little fanfare and even less expectation. A few days later the first western importers, whose buying habits are not dictated by taste, but by fervent desperation to Be There First, slipped the disc carefully out of its fetishistic Japanese packaging and into their pristine PS2s. Ten hours later they picked their jaws off the floor. To their surprise and delight, this time they'd hit the jackpot: they were there first for something really important. They were the first to experience the Emotion Engine as it was promised, the first to experience a pivotal moment in videogaming's evolution.

From here, everything would be different, because everyone, *everyone*, would know *Ico*, and it would surely shape gaming's future.

Why? Not because of what *Ico* was – a delicately weighted hybrid of puzzle game and platformer that set out to do something quite simple and did it with elegance. Nor because of how *Ico*'s faultless world was constructed – minimalist, delicately ethereal, but with so much solidity in its stone-sculpted castle walls that it didn't seem like level design, but *architecture*. Nor was it really down to the premise – 'escape the castle and save the girl' had kept videogaming in stock storylines forever, though never had it been more tactfully executed than here. *Ico*'s magic wasn't quantifiable, and still isn't. Call it maturity, or call it a soul. Reviewers knew they loved it, but couldn't tell people why. Eight out of ten be damned: *Ico* is still revolutionary, not in terms of easily expressed stripped-down mechanics, but in the way it makes players feel. It should have sold millions. The end.

Of course, there was no fairytale. *Ico* didn't sell millions. Despite being all of those things and more, despite the soul, it didn't get the one thing that really counts: commercial success. Everyone who bought it loved it, but so few people bought it in the first place. How could the game herald the dawn of a brave new world of emotion-led gaming – emotion that wasn't fear or hate or terror – if no one saw it? Does being the first even matter if no one knows? As minimal stocks became bargain-bin fodder, the importers moved on to finding new



Many monsters carry huge weapons, maces or swords, while others, like the flying beast over the page, appear to rely on their naturally occurring claws and teeth for offensive measures. The hero's horse should prove invaluable in avoiding such attacks

firsts, and the oh-my-bleeding-heart critics wept for the death of originality, then returned to evangelising guns and ammo. Plus ça change…

Things stay the same

If the *Ico* team wasn't to change gaming, perhaps gaming would change the *Ico* team. **Fumito Ueda**, producer of the first game, knew that things had to be different on his new project. "With *Ico*, it was one of our intentions to make it a critical success," he explains. "On the other hand, the balance might have been too much toward the critical side, including our marketing activity, so that is one of the points we had to review. We wanted to make the new project with more popular appeal." Besides, it'd be difficult to create the same cultural shockwaves with a linear follow-up: "For *Ico*-like game design, I think that *Ico* is the culmination. And frankly, although I think that it is possible to exceed the quality level of *Ico* with the same sort of content, I figured we can't make a bigger impact than *Ico* did."

As such, *Ico 2* – as we'll call it here even though it's only a working title, the game also being known as *Nico* and *Wanda And Colossus* at various points in its development – isn't a straight sequel. Thematically, though, it's instantly recognisable. If you consider *Ico* a classic fairytale brushed in a palette of washed-out greys and greens, you'll be immediately at home in the stonewashed fields of *Ico 2*. "The game design itself has changed a lot, but visually it is similar because we're using the same designer," confirms Ueda. So far, so pretty.

But Ueda's proclamations that the game design has changed aren't lightweight. For a start, *Ico 2*'s (new, as yet unnamed) hero has no Yorda-style companion. "It's no exaggeration to say that Yorda is the main character of the game *Ico*," muses Ueda on one of videogaming's new icons.

"As a game designer, I have always thought that way. Giving life to Yorda, giving her appeal and presence, was the key to *Ico*'s design success. To protect a non-playable character, like Yorda, and lead her along the way, that was something that was completed in the game

If you consider Ico a classic fairytale in a palette of washed-out greys and greens, you'll be immediately at home in the fields of Ico 2

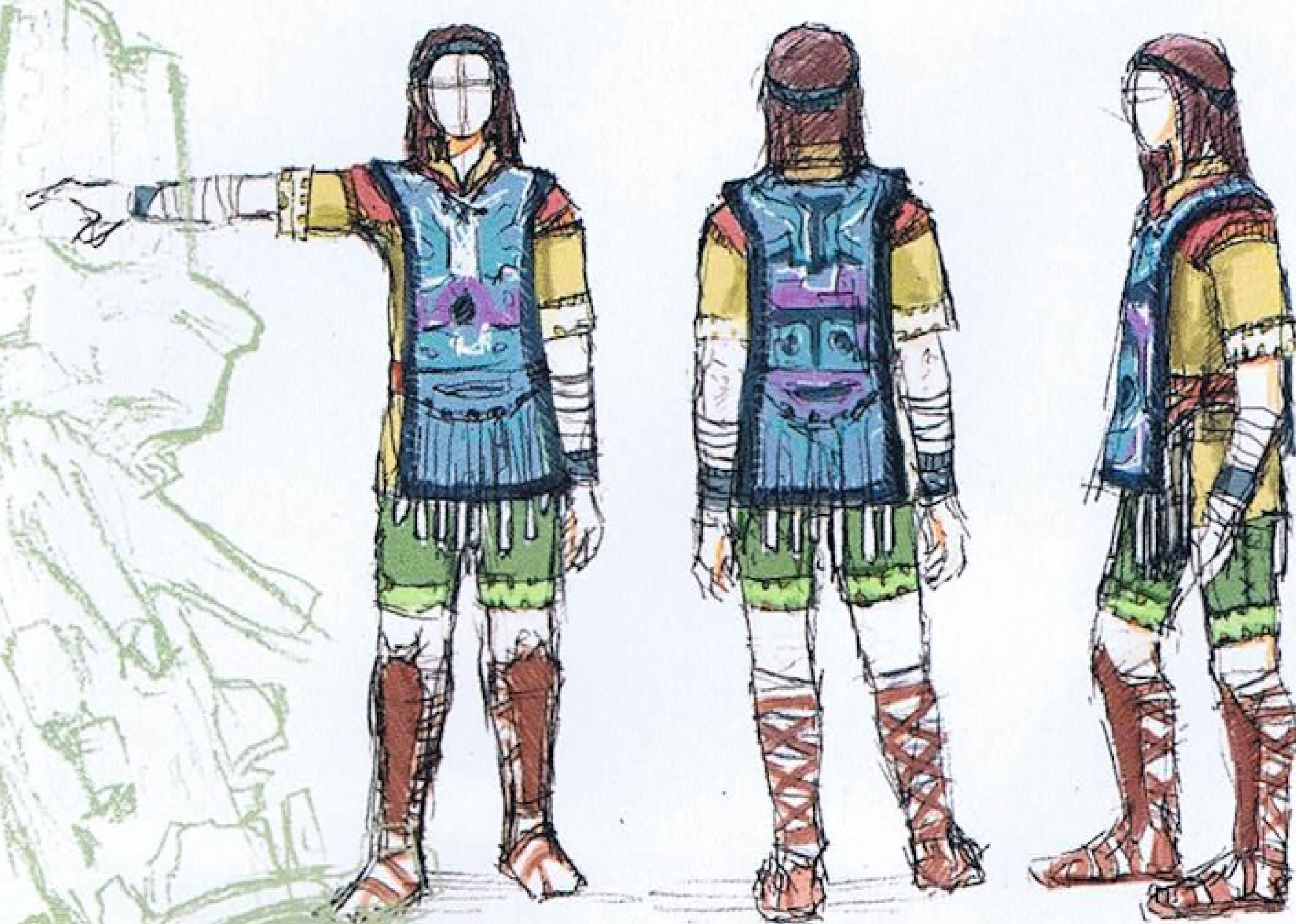




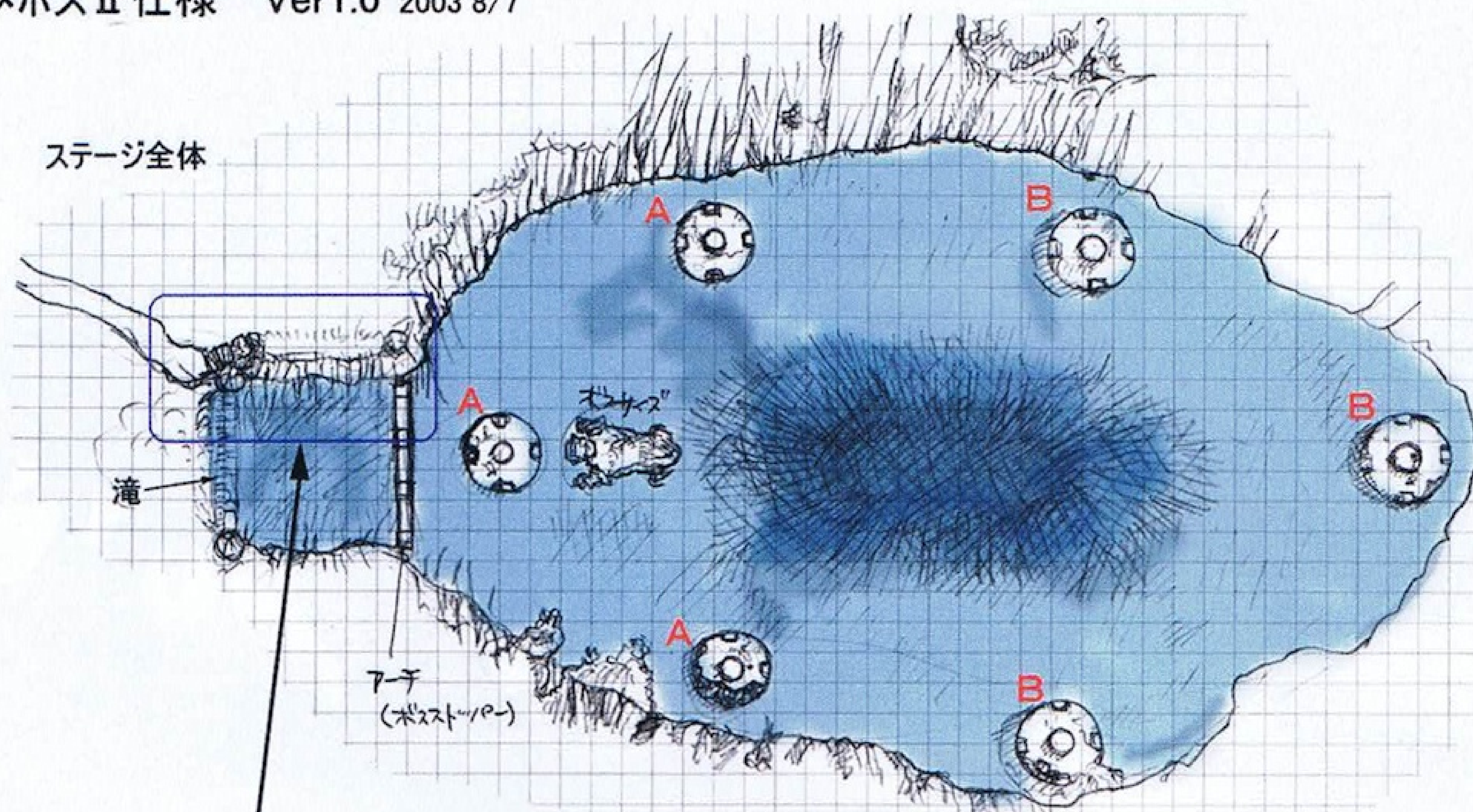


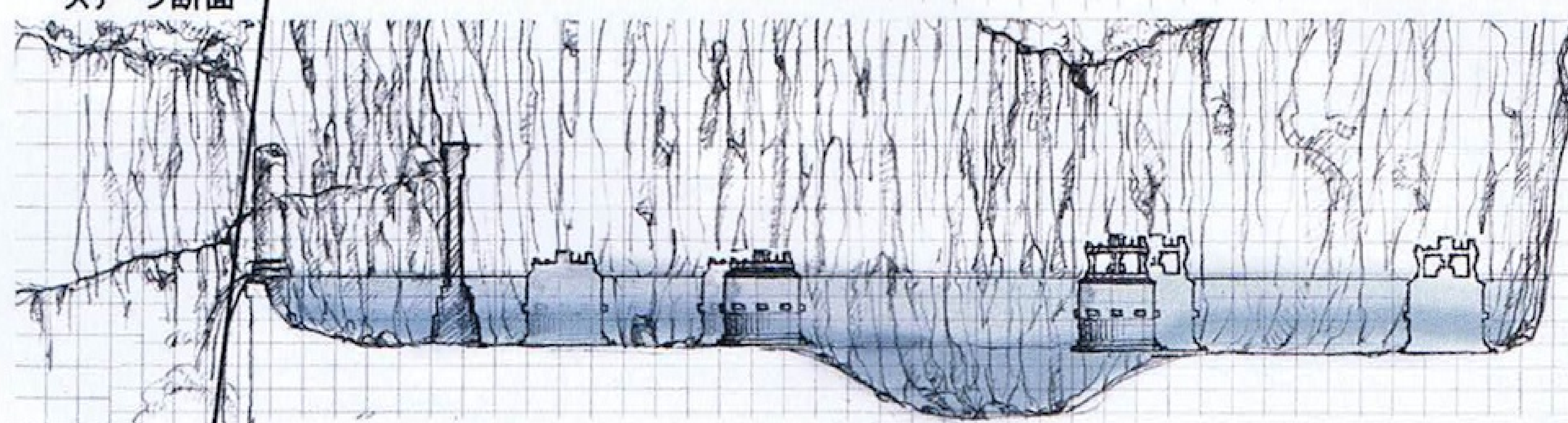
Udea: "This game is for those with quick reactions. However, there are lots of puzzle elements as you have to match wits against monsters' AI, and some monsters' bodies themselves are some sort of puzzles. Overall, there are more action skills required compared to *Ico*"

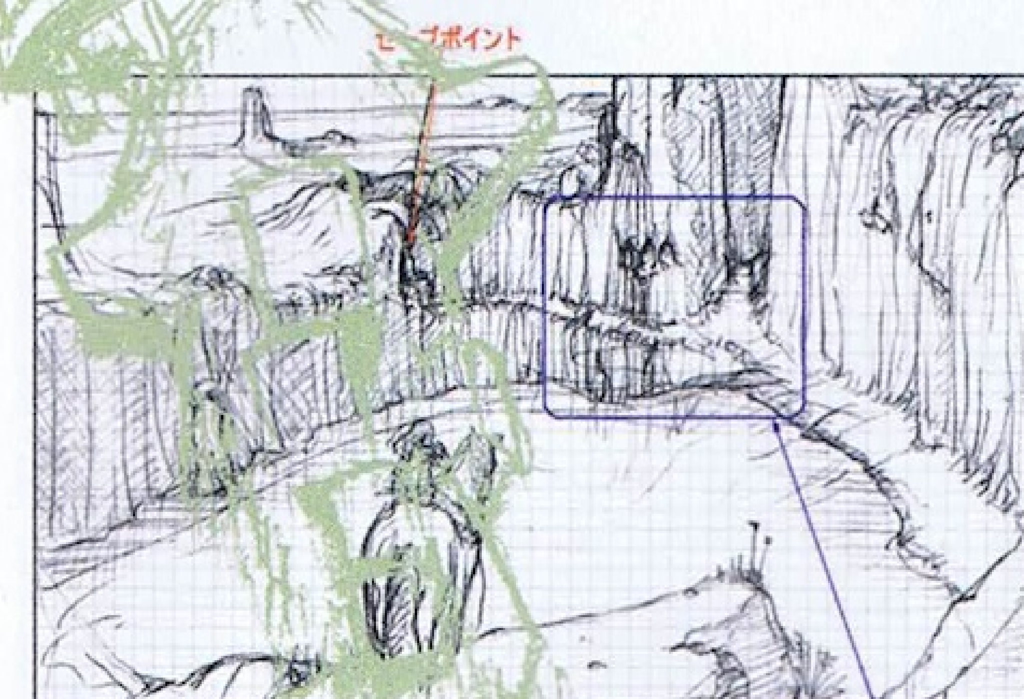
Format: PlayStation2
Publisher: Sony Computer Entertainment
Developer: In-house (SCEI)
Origin: Japan
Release: 2005



カメボスⅡ仕様　Ver1.0 2003 8/7

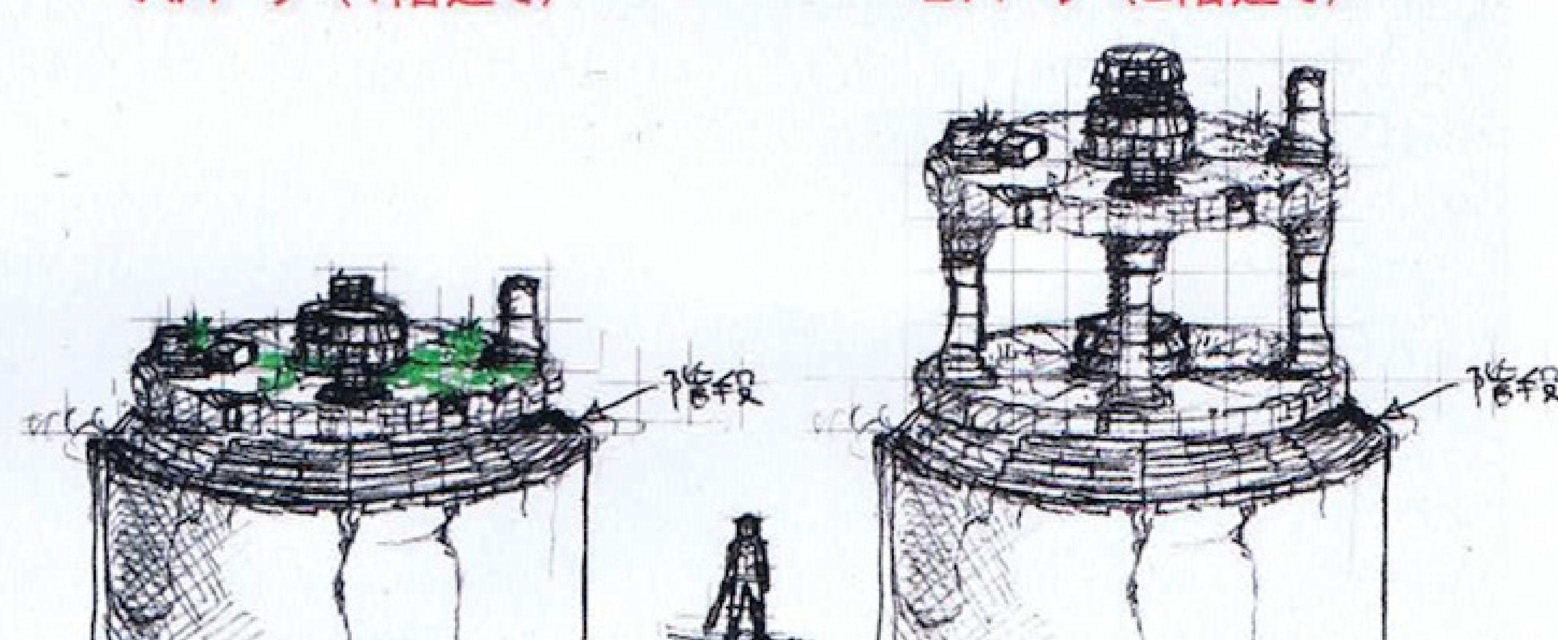






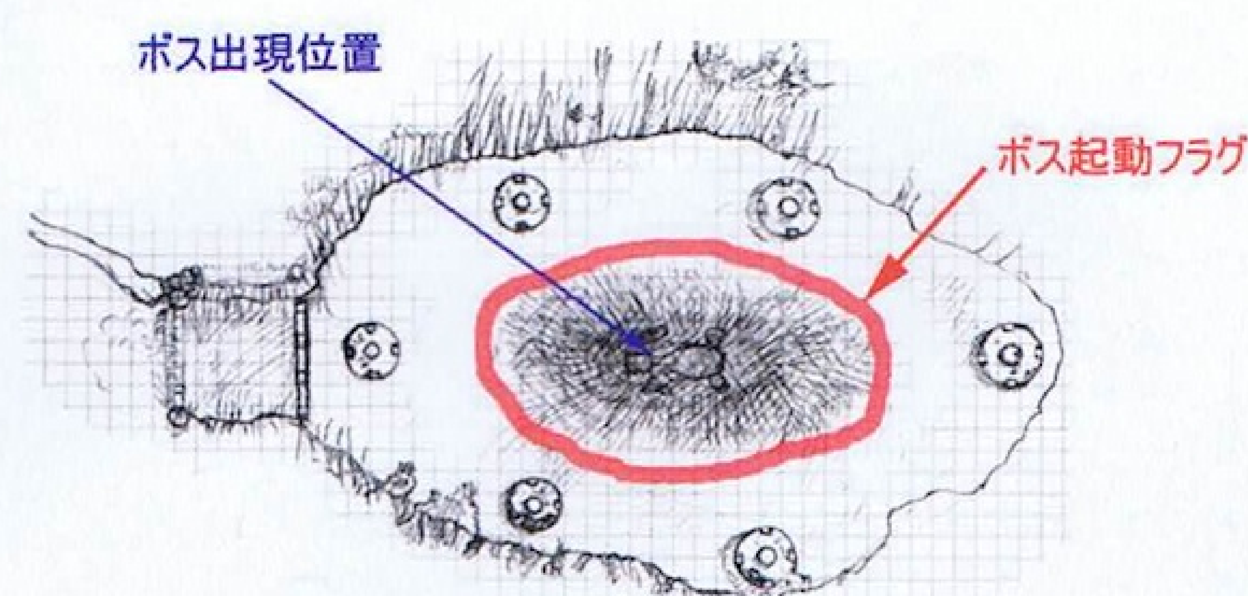












Big/ugly/beautiful?

Ico 2's world is as distinctive as that of its predecessor. Ueda explains how he and his team set about making something so bleak yet so attractive, and the subtle complexities involved in animating *Ico 2*'s huge creatures: "It depends on the situation, but basically I will start with the 3D software. The reason for this is because if I start sketching on paper you can see the friction of the pencil and the texture of the paper, and each of these things increases the density of the picture, and the final artwork is one with that in it.

"However, if I try to reproduce that on screen, I lose all those precise things, and the density of the artwork becomes disappointingly low. Therefore, to create a 3D model, I use 3D software to produce the density, which I believe is the most efficient way to produce it without messing up. To me, 3D software is what a typewriter is to a novelist. It is the same reason that novelists use typewriters to write their novel from the beginning without first writing on paper by hand. Still, with some of the artwork it can be faster and easier to hand-sketch it.

"The monsters are produced in exactly the same way as they were in *Ico*. The software used has changed a bit, but the policy of animation design is the same. Only this time, most of the monsters are huge. The huge animals that exist in real life do not have any unnecessary movements. Their skin, muscles and bones have a wonderful motion. In order to give the feeling of great size, smooth motion is necessary and I am most careful to reproduce this. Huge things lack some of the poses and motions of small ones. All the actions need to be smooth and must connect from one to another, and this is where our animators are having the most difficulties."





Udea: "The smart player will use various tactics to go against the organic deforming monsters. Normally, stages in videogames are fixed, but with movable stages, the game can offer options and solutions"





"For general monster concept design we tried to blend uncommon and common motifs, like taking a building and a real-life animal"

design of *Ico*. But, as a game designer, I'm not as interested in that now. I'm more interested in challenging new aspects."

So, in search of a new challenge, Ueda shuns the confines of companion-driven castle exploration for something spectacularly different. In *Ico 2*, the player rides horseback across a vast tract of open countryside, hunting huge, towering monsters. Silhouetted against the horizon, the creatures are shambling giants carved from giant blocks of stone. There are many different types – we've seen at least 12, ranging from gothic armadillos the size of a tank to skyscraper-tall masonry-ribbed men and mammoth rock dragons – and they are variously intimidating, powerful, magical and ancient. The creatures are *Ico 2*'s core.

"We thought that we should avoid creating stereotyped creatures that are commonly used in videogames," says Ueda. "So, for general monster concept design we tried to blend uncommon and common motifs, like taking a building and a real-life animal, or a mask from an ancient tribe and a different animal. We're trying to create creatures that not only convey the impression of simple terror but also mysteriousness, oddness."

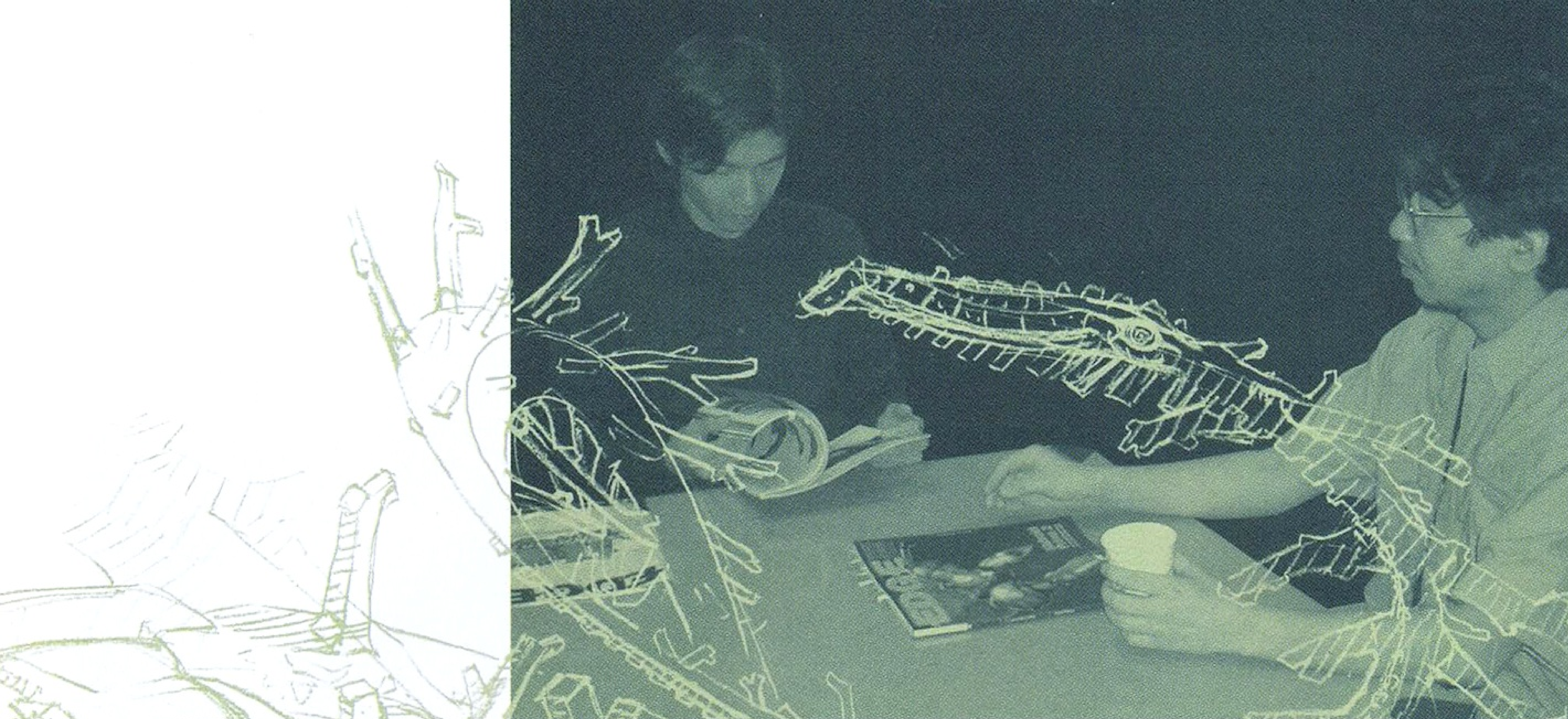
The creatures are also *Ico 2*'s most concrete link to its predecessor. The physical challenge in the first game was in conquering a castle through logic, dexterity and spatial awareness. Here, the challenge is the same, with the giant monsters acting as huge, moving castles. The player must use acrobatics and timing to climb their way up, across or around the monster's body to reach its weak point and attack.

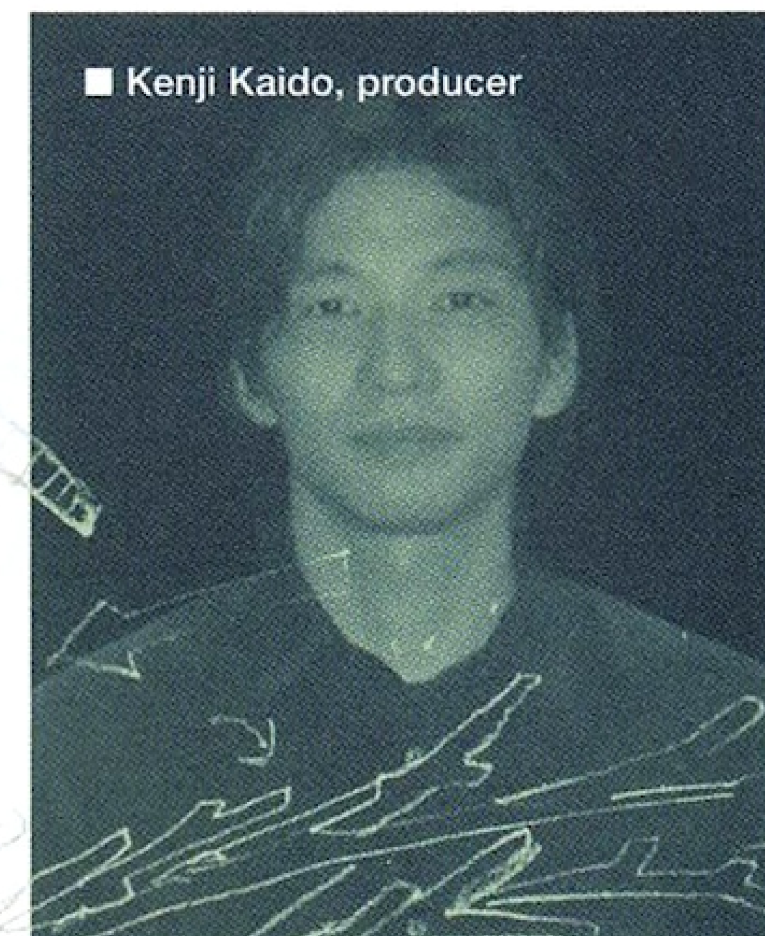
The size isn't just superficial. Every part of the enemy is a part to be explored, as Ueda reveals: "Huge monsters appear in many videogames, but I think the creation of those monsters was a part of presentation. The monsters' bodies are a part of the fields you have to conquer, so monster design and level design are closely related."

Climbing a moving surface is clearly a dynamic task, forcing the player to constantly react to new angles and new situations. At some points the hero thrusts his sword deep into his foe's hide, not to attack, but for extra grip. Early versions of the code feature an on-screen friction meter, which indicates how well the hero is holding on to the shifting surface. The meter may not make it into the final game, but that – and other (conceivably placeholder) on-screen furniture, like health bars and the diagrams that reveal the enemy's weak points – reveal another change in philosophy which may upset *Ico* purists.

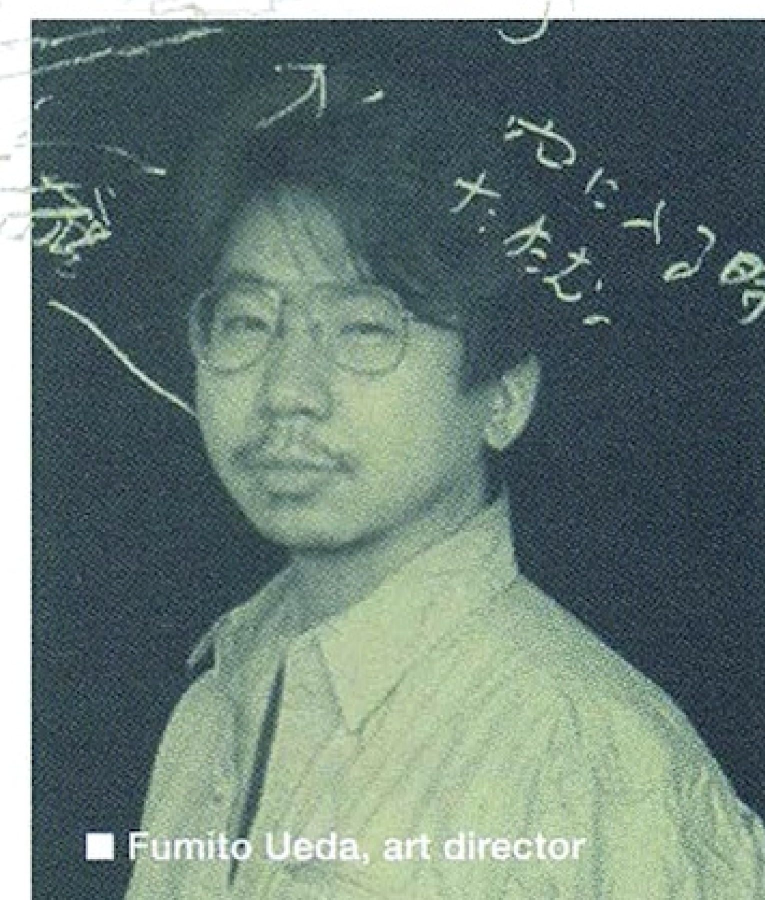
"In *Ico*, the reason why we didn't indicate any bars or maps was not only because we wanted to cut off all things that may be in the way of emotional involvement, but because we wanted to make a clear differentiation with other games," says Ueda. "We didn't want to make it look like a videogame.

"However, on the other hand, this restricted us in many respects, including game design. This time, we have released all those constraints and are creating a very neutral status. If those indications are necessary to make the game more fun, we will include them. If they aren't necessary, we won't. There may be such maps and bars, and maybe not."





■ Kenji Kaido, producer



■ Fumito Ueda, art director

A view of the mountains

Another element which may be of concern to some is the camera: *Ico 2* is switching from the beautifully handled fixed perspectives of the first game to a potentially troublesome type of thirdperson view. Ueda's team has handled the change pragmatically. "There's almost no fixed camera system like the kind used in *Ico*," he says. "Since the main character freely moves around in 3D space, the camera is set right behind. However, because of where the camera is set up, screens tend to be too flat and symmetrical. So we sometimes try to displace the position of the camera slightly to break the monotony."

Above all that, anything else is speculation. Partly because Ueda is reticent when it comes to plot and gameplay specifics, but also because *Ico 2* is still at a flexible stage of development, and things can change when you've got as organic an attitude to game design as his team. For example, it's undecided how the combat sequences will be linked, although it seems there's some freedom of choice on the part of the player, the 'hub' of the landscape being a central building called Hokora.

The inky black evil that pervades the first game can be witnessed flooding from the quivering bodies of downed creatures

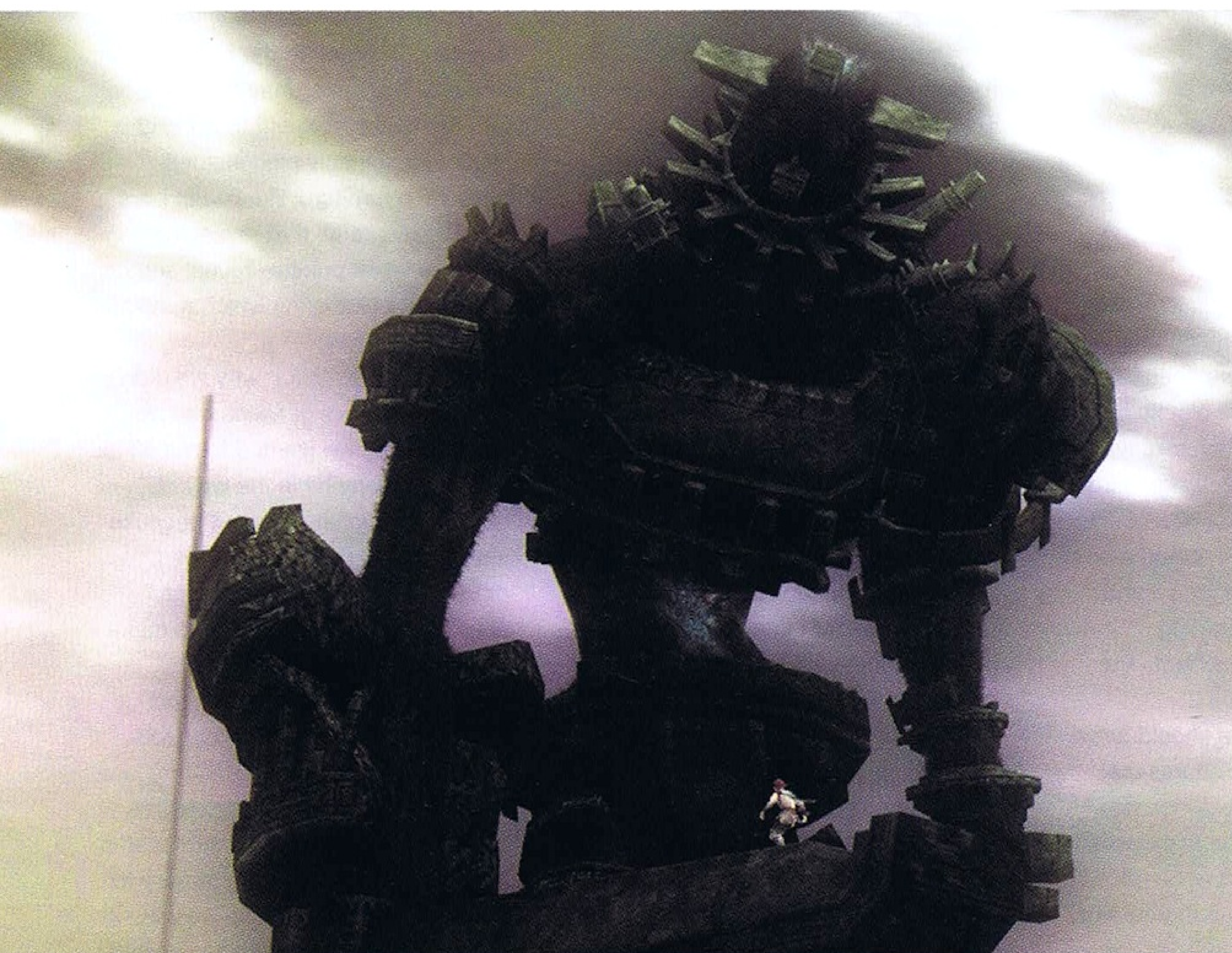
The game universe appears to be the same, too, although Ueda refuses to talk about how the two games connect ("No comment, please. All we can tell you now is that we're not thinking of this as a sequel"). Despite that, the inky black evil that pervades the first game can be witnessed flooding from the quivering bodies of downed creatures. Early code shows tantalising glimpses of a small group of boys riding rings around a lumbering, three-storey-high monster. A boy, a red poncho, a helmet, two horns… Yes, it's early code, but maybe, just maybe…

Take the path of courage

You can speculate further. Creating a startling follow-up to such an impressive debut was never going to be easy, but the team has taken a brave route, sidestepping *Ico*'s legacy by creating something new. Ueda says the biggest challenge, technically, was creating the technology required to let the player move their way around complex dynamic surfaces. More than issues of mechanical design, though, his answer is much more revealing. The most difficult thing about designing *Ico 2*? "To be released from the spell of *Ico*. In a good way."

That's the biggest problem Sony will have, and the biggest problem *Ico* fans will have with the next generation of storytelling. There is no Yorda, no castle, no primitive stick combat with creatures you used to dream lived under your bed. There is no reason we will find out what happened, no reason we'd want to. There's no *room* for a straight *Ico* sequel and no point, since it was a dream, perfect, shining, self-contained and now over.

But that game can still have its fairytale ending. If Ueda and his team achieve what they've set out to – if *Ico 2* is as big a critical success as its older brother, if it successfully transports the essence of the original into a completely new dynamic, and if, if, that big, ugly, beautiful if, it succeeds at retail – then *Ico* becomes relevant again, and gaming can start to learn everything about storytelling, maturity and the soul, everything it should have learned the first time around. Until then, we close the book, and wait.



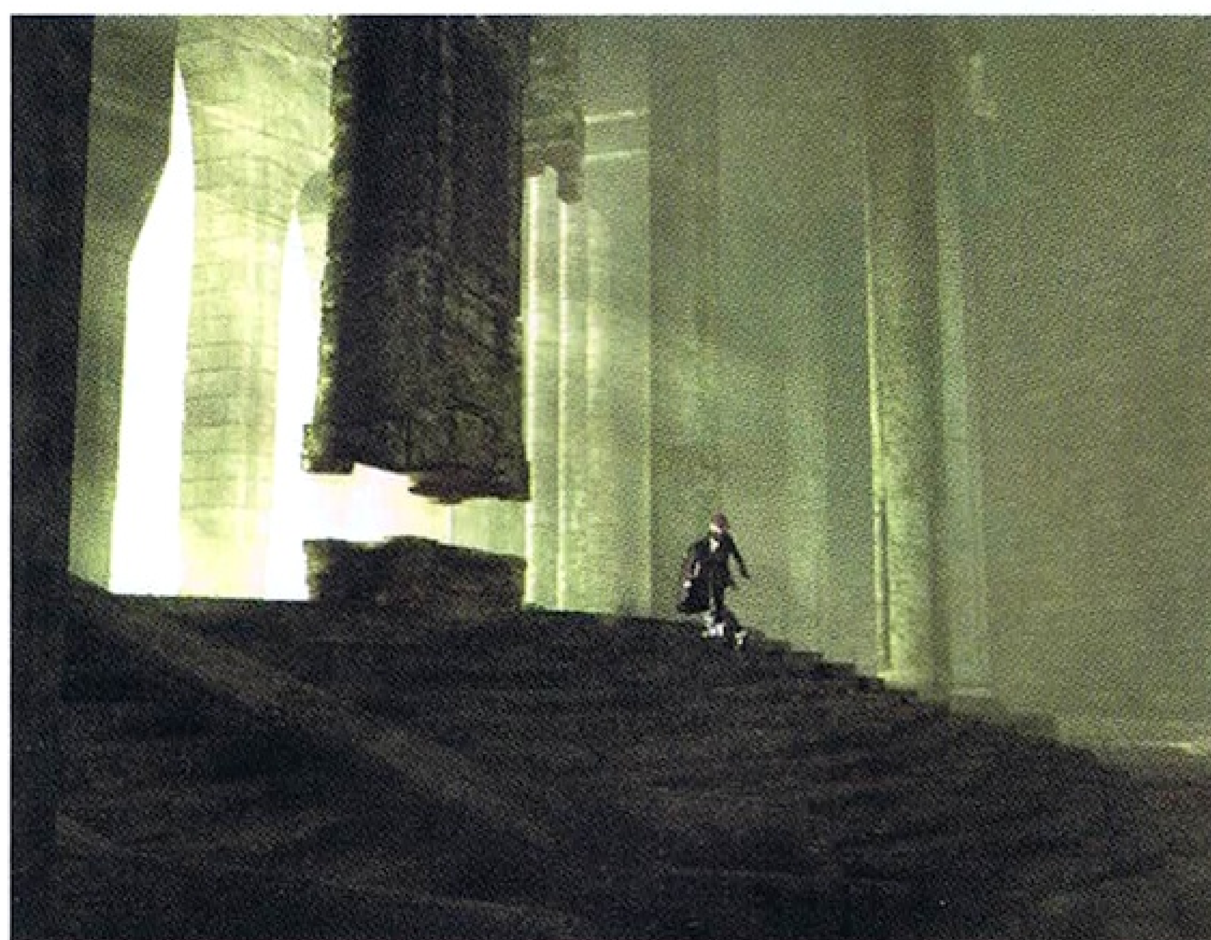
Udea: "Huge monsters appear in various different games, but with such significance in their size and design, I think this game is probably the first." Monsters act like moving platforming sections, with a goal to be reached

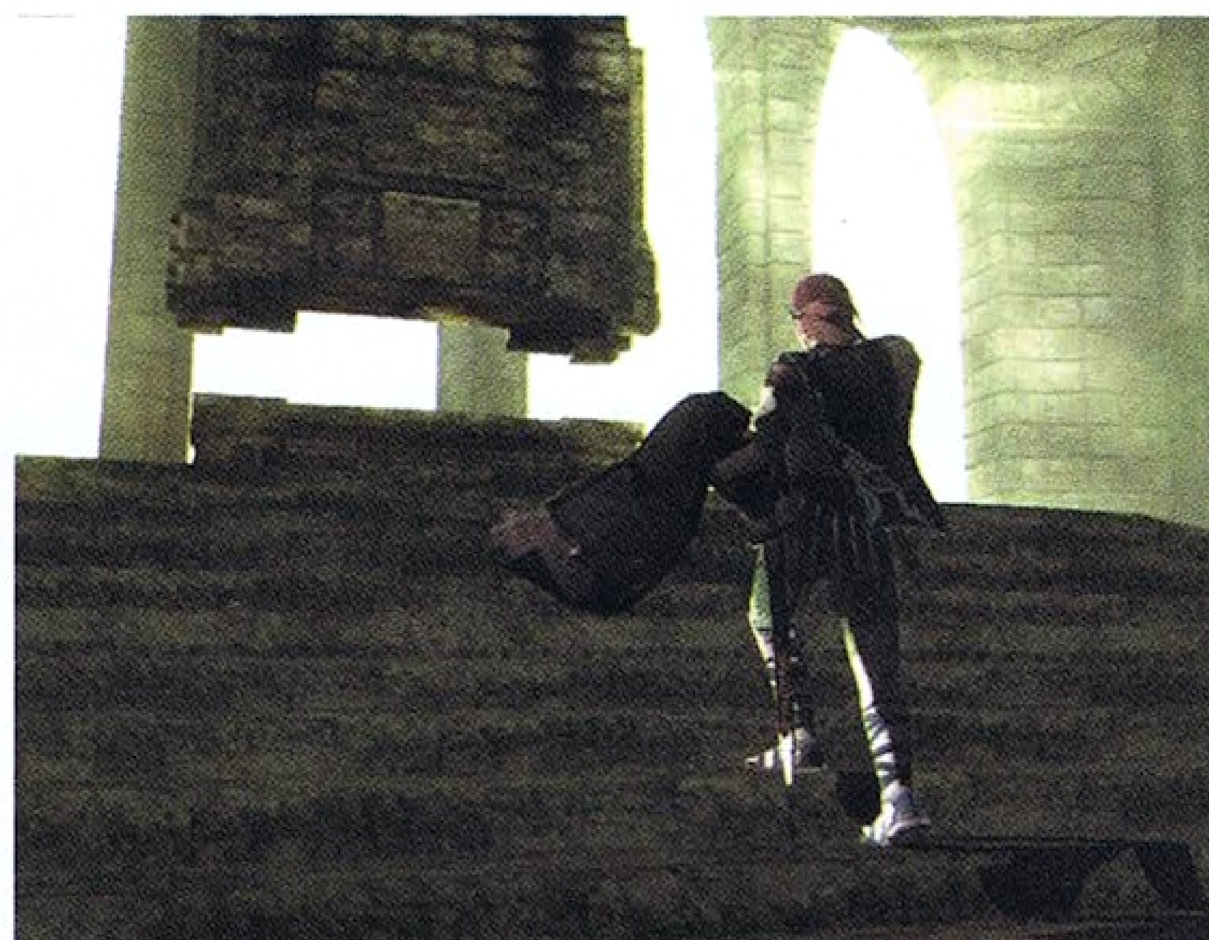






Ueda isn't sure if the player will use a map to guide themselves around the landscape. "We are currently studying some ideas," he says. "We will select the one that suits the game best at the end." Who is the mystery female shown here? It's another secret for now







Edge's review policy

Every issue, **Edge** evaluates the best, most interesting, hyped, innovative or promising games on a scale of ten, where five naturally represents the middle value. **Edge**'s rating system is fair, progressive and balanced. An average game deserves an average mark – not, as many believe, seven out of ten. Scores broadly correspond to the following sentiments: zero: nothing, one: disastrous, two: appalling, three: severely flawed, four: disappointing, five: average, six: competent, seven: distinguished, eight: excellent, nine: astounding, ten: revolutionary.

Edge's most played

Sega Ages Vol 14: Alien Syndrome
As with most Ages releases, it's an imperfect remake, but adding *Robotron*-style dual stick control to the familiar relentless splatter makes for twoplayer hysteria.



(PS2) 3D Ages

Halo
The frustrations of *Killzone*'s teething troubles (see Alphas) sent us scurrying back. An hour of enraptured coop later its still clear that nothing comes close.



(Xbox) Microsoft

Breakdown
If nothing else – and, unfortunately, there *is* practically nothing else – it's a rare game that you'll play through simply for the promise of what it could have been.



(Xbox) Namco

Burnout 3
Rarely has so much fun been had with one joypad and eight hangovers. *Burnout*'s Party Crash is very hard to beat for a post-post-pub gaming comedown.



(PS2, Xbox) Electronic Arts

Sequel season

Old gaming franchises still manage to keep time reliably

Going through the list of this issue's reviews, many of you may notice that a pattern swiftly forms. Both the colon or a numerical suffix have been put to use in most of these titles, the tell-tale hallmark of a sequel or series of games.

The reason lies in that follow-ups to successful games are generally going to be released in a major retail period, because that's the time to capitalise on a good name – when people are out looking. Perhaps it's a simple case of coincidence when it's a sequel such as *Outrun 2,* that happens to be landing in this boom rather than a case of time needed to create a follow-up to the debut instalment. The paradigm leap that's taken place in gaming technology since *Outrun* first hit the arcades makes this a case of resurrecting retro, rather than a seasonal cash-in. Who'd *want* to go on sale with so much competition to face this season?

Other releases, like the rather uninspired *THUG 2* remind us that many follow-up releases are working on an annual turn-around. In fairness to Neversoft, they've taken a much loved series a long way, but there comes a time when a tweaked version of last year's game just isn't surprising anymore. Perhaps it really is time to brand it Bam, and just cash in on the MTV connection. More to the point, perhaps it's time to spend two or three years innovating again.

Cynicism is rarely appropriate for long at this end of the year however, as there are exceptions to every rule. *Pro Evolution Soccer 4* is brilliant simply *because* it is refining a formula in order to perfect a simulation that's fun to play. Doing things like pro-actively improving a control system that is already the most critically acclaimed of its kind, stops a fan base from having reason to ever become less interested in the next game.

Rome: Total War serves as another example of how working on a series can eventually result in a breakthrough of sorts. A simple move to a 3D campaign map has transformed the turn-based aspect of the *Total War* series from a somewhat crude way to match armies to battle into something that ties both turn-based and real-time strategy into one cohesive package.

Love or hate the follow-on phenomenon, sequels will always be a sign of this season.




082


086


088


101


104

OutRun 2

Format: Xbox Publisher: Sega Developer: AM2/Sumo Price: $99.95 Release: October 15







Anyone with an evil streak and time to burn may want to try running over the flag-waving marshal at the start line



It's a testament to the strength of the classic *OutRun* tunes that the new music tracks in the sequel just aren't up to scratch. Thankfully, the originals of Splash Wave et al are unlockable

Driving games, as a genre, may be as oversubscribed as the cliché goes, but they're becoming harder and harder to pin down. Into just what kind of pigeonhole does *Burnout 3*'s turbo orgy of destruction fit? Third/firstperson risk-based action combat racer? Interactive snuff porn for metallurgists? There's no longer any pigeonhole, bar the one it's carved for itself. Modern driving games carry personality beyond genre, possibly thanks to the need to stand out from the crowd. And so it is to *OutRun 2*, which is as much a driving game as *Ikaruga* is a shoot 'em up; it is, of course, but that definition alone does the game weak justice. *OutRun 2* is Sega at its best – uncompromising, disciplined and coolly brilliant – as much as it was when the original *OutRun* seduced a generation of gamers.

OutRun 2 is manna for powerslide fetishists. It's built around a simple, but effective, idea – the ability to perform supernaturally long and severe powerslides with little loss of speed. In Ferraris. Around supernaturally long and severe bends. In Ferraris. It's not so much a one-note mechanic, though, as a one-inch punch of game design – snappy and compact, and the better for it.

OutRun 2's arcade mode is represented by a fine conversion from Sumo, with gleaming roadside detail that's pretty enough to impress but repetitive enough to never cause too much of a distraction. The Heart Attack mode lends the game's diverging 15-track structure another burst of life, as players amass love hearts by performing tasks dictated by the (surprisingly aggressive) female passenger. *OutRun 2*'s main mode is deceptively subtle, packing a lot of slight strategy into what first appear to be shallow, pointlessly overblown and brutally unrefined powerslides. A gentle tug on the brake is enough to send your vehicle into a sweeping skid that, through judicious steering, can be used to change lanes or clip the apex while your car is nearly side on to the screen. That subtlety can be hard to detect and direct, but it's brought home deftly by OutRun Challenge Mode, a cavernous series of mini-missions and tasks.

OutRun 2 is manna for powerslide fetishists, built around the ability to perform supernaturally long and severe powerslides with little loss of speed



There are some corners you just *have* to slide through to overcome, reinforcing the precise and pristine nature of *OutRun 2*'s sliding mechanic, which allows ludicrous skids without slowing down

The challenges themselves are initially demanding, though their presence is disappointingly novel at the best of times. To their credit they're imaginative without feeling too much like novelties and they're built around the game instead of being mindlessly dropped in, but there's no escaping their overarching function of artificially ballooning the game's longevity. One challenge has the driver taking bends at the optimum angle at which to photograph nearby giant heart balloons. Other missions require the player to multitask heavily, memorising a series of fruits or perform arithmetic as they drive; it's these mind-boggling challenges that prove to be the most fiendish. They're the videogame equivalent of rubbing your stomach while patting your head, but as equally pointless and unrelated as cross-country skiing and shooting in a biathlon. Happily, the reward structure and the proliferation of bonuses – new cars, tunes, reverse tracks and special stages based on certain other Sega racing games – make the effort worthwhile.

The latter stages of the mission mode do grate, however. They're just coarse elongations of earlier tasks, and they can become crushingly hard, with a single mistake forcing a restart and minutes of play to be wasted. And it means that, while Sumo















The game's frontend is a magnificently unfussy and refreshing mix of soft blue sky and palm tree silhouettes, accompanied by the calming sound of gently lapping waves



has made a valiant attempt at extending the longevity of the game, it can only postpone the feeling of limitation for so long; *OutRun 2* breathes ample life into a single idea and the mission mode takes it to its logical conclusion, but the feeling of repetition during extended play is inevitable. The harsh criteria for progression doesn't help matters: grades vary from A to E, with AA and AAA available for masterful performances – but the minimum grade required to pass a stage is A. *Project Gotham Racing 2*'s flexible difficulty gradient, where skill is rewarded but lack of it isn't punished, would be far more welcome. The frustration isn't helped, either, by the sensation of persecution that results from the player seemingly left worse off for any collision with a rival, regardless of whether you're ramming or being rammed.

Still, *OutRun 2*'s heady caricature of driving is some kind of high-water mark for how much beautifully slick, instantly fluid and, thanks to the excellent use of joypad rumble, gloriously tangible play can be squeezed into five minutes of flamboyant autoerotica. The only thing it's bothered with simulating is uninhibited and gratifying videogaming, even though it's a thrill whose long-term hooks are limited to high-score whittling. Regardless of genre or pigeonhole, *OutRun 2* is in excellent company, comparable to anything offered by the best of the *Ridge Racer* series and, fittingly, any of Sega's most memorable racing games.

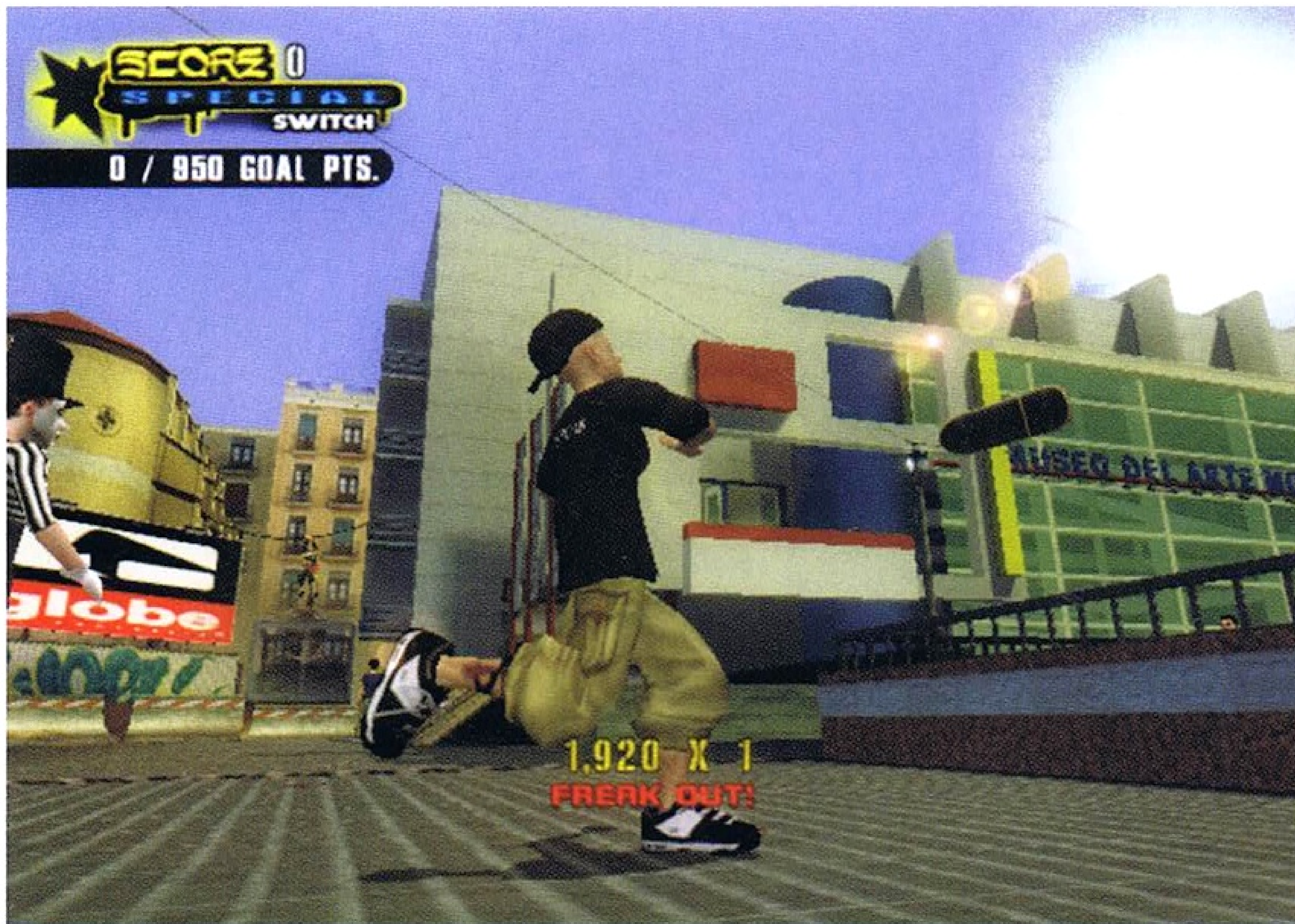
Edge rating: Eight out of ten

Ghost musters

While *OutRun 2* supports online play over its arcade and bonus tracks for a total of eight players (with the leader deciding the route when at a junction), it's the ability to download and race ghosts of other players that proves massively compelling. And understandably so, since it mixes the concentrated precision of solo play with the ever-increasing standards of rival players.

Tony Hawk's Underground 2

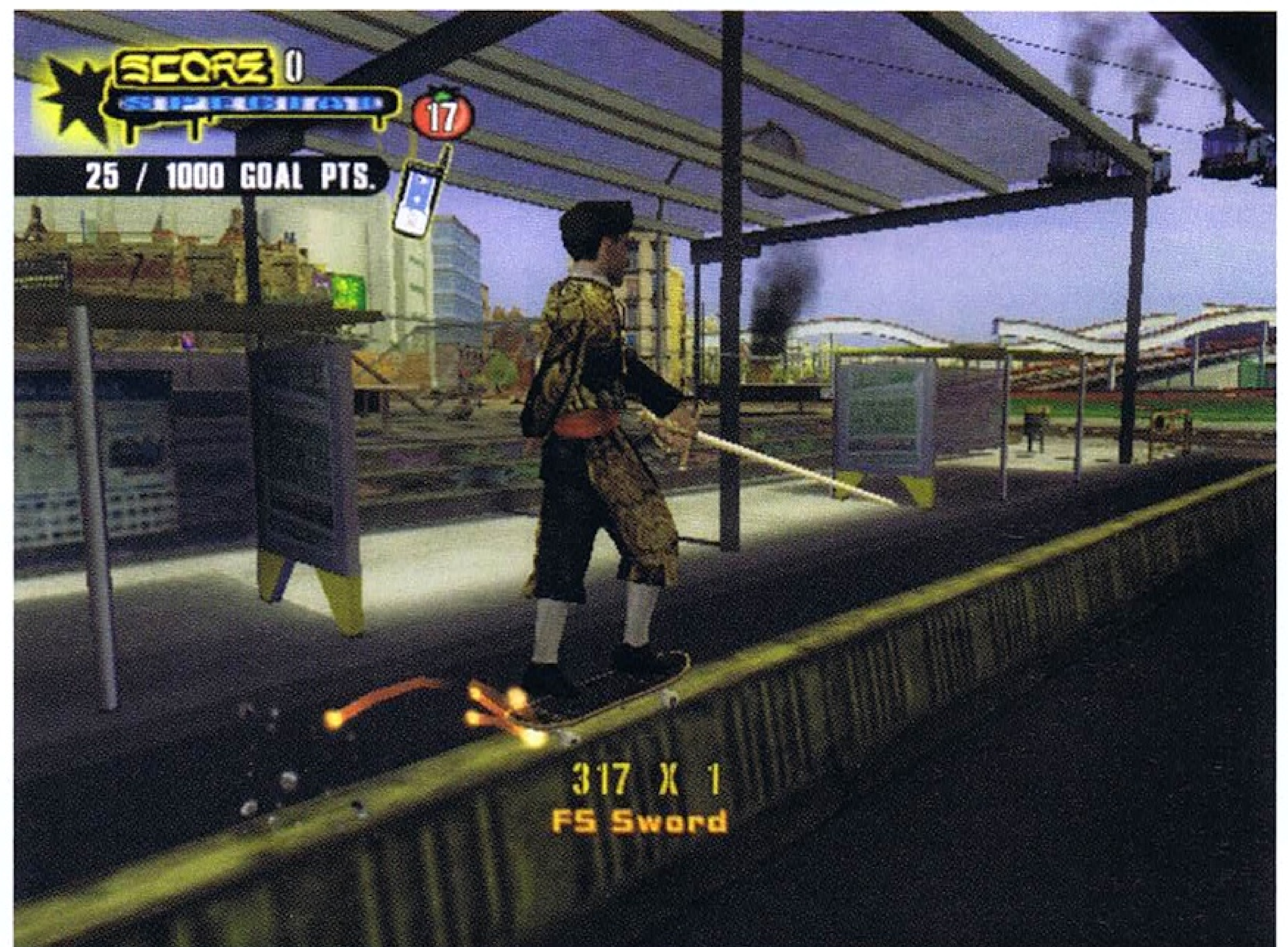
Format: **Xbox, GC, PS2 (version tested)** Publisher: **Activision** Developer: **Neversoft** Price: **$99.95** Release: **Out now**



This young chap either lost his footing, or perhaps he just lost patience with a tedious challenge that's simply not fun for somebody who mastered the controls about four instalments ago…







With the sixth iteration of the *Tony Hawk Skateboarding* series (excluding the GBA and N-Gage versions and the Xbox *THPS 1&2* hybrid), Neversoft has failed to deliver a game with any reflective evolution. *Tony Hawk's Underground 2* instead stands as a by-product of old technology, tired mechanics and a less-than-innovative stamp in an all too popular genre.

Immediate problems arise in the game's uninspired presentation, which has barely changed since day one. We're led to believe this is a more edgy, urban adaptation of the *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater* foundation, however, this is only present through the inclusion of Bam Margera's screwball celebrity and the "Underground" portion of the game's title.

What is left when these factors are removed from the product is a poorly scripted game devoid of any stimulation via gameplay. Be it the weak Story Mode, clumsy level design, bland visuals or unbalanced attributes system, *THUG 2* fails to up the ante in a franchise that lost sight of its innovative roots long ago, serving as yet another stoop in a spiral staircase.



This, apparently, is very 'bull-headed'. So is insisting on plastering the series with the same breed of goofy gags.

THUG 2 fails to up the ante in a franchise that lost sight of its innovative roots long ago, serving as yet another stoop in a spiral staircase.

In keeping with the setup from the first *Underground*, *THUG 2* comes complete with a full Story Mode – Tony Hawk and Bam Margera have formed a 'scavenger hunt' skating event which sees two teams compete for points in various locales across the world. This "World Destruction Tour" denotes a freeform whisk through levels built off Americanised stereotypes that may or may not offend corresponding countries. Most times, the visual or aural 'jokes' worked into these levels undermine the generally enjoyable humour scripted for our cranking anti-celebrities. The odd gem or two can be gleaned by the roving skater, though these comedic highs are few and far between.

Each level, replete with aforementioned stereotypical imagery, offers a number of tedious tasks and objectives for completion. A new aspect to completing goals comes in the form of multi-tasking; there are still no looming level time-limits, and only specific goals have a time-sensitive aspect, so objectives involving a lot of exploration can be completed in part, rather than full, giving you a more freeform approach to gameplay.

As the game's 'Rookie' skater, a number of tasks are available from the outset to prove yourself with. You also choose a team-mate to hook up with once you've gathered enough points (there are also 'Guests' to find with their own list of objectives). The 'Pro Challenges' then become the meat of the game's objectives, though that is hardly saying much. Skill-based skating objectives from earlier versions have been replaced with errands and poorly-scripted 'comedy goals', each more banal than the last. Hitting NPCs with shrimp is hardly side-splitting, though someone at Neversoft obviously thought so.

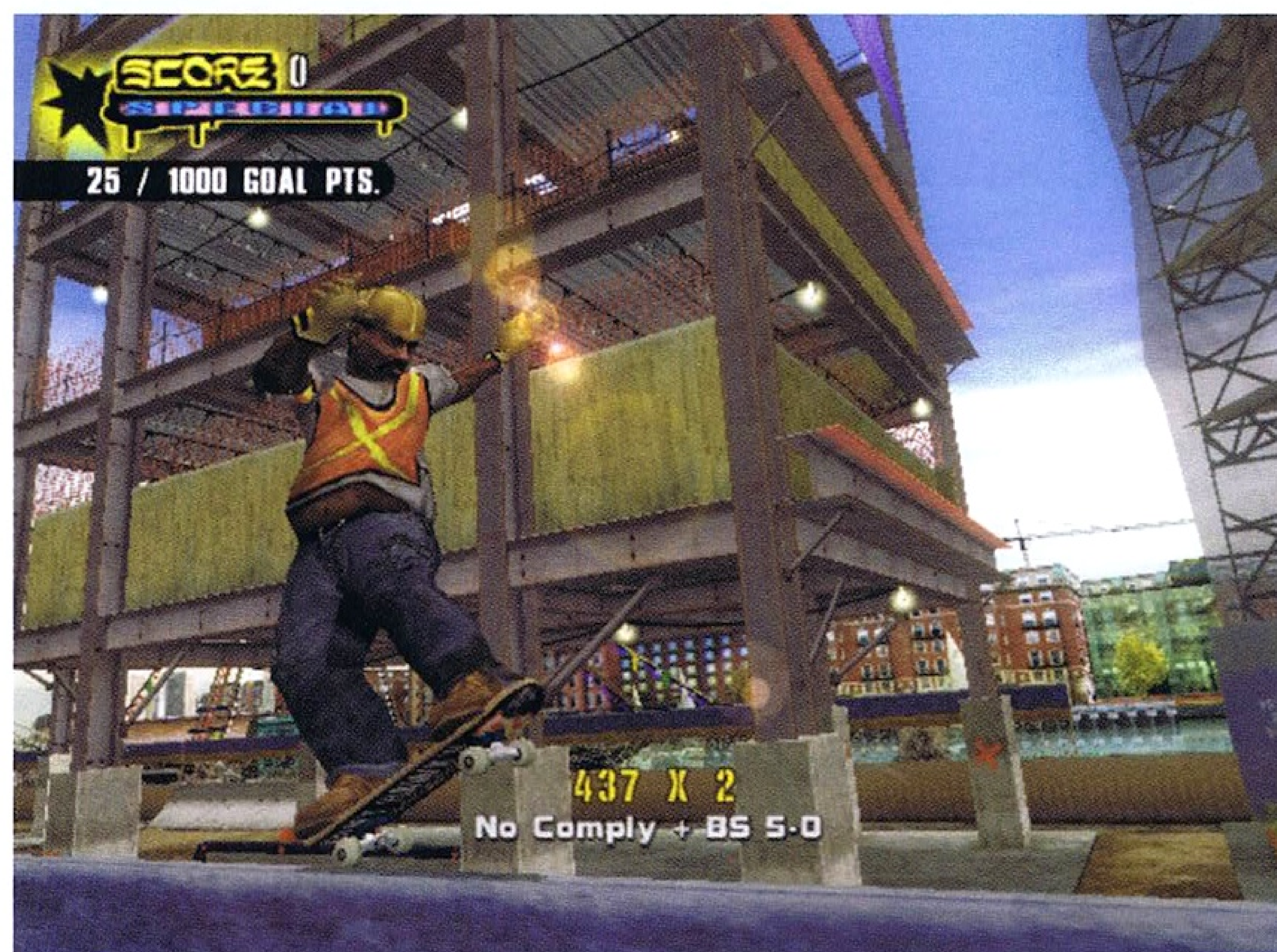
However, it's in the setup for the game's weak premise we find its backbone; fans of the antics of Bam Margera (*Viva La Bam*, *CKY*, *Jackass*) will get a lot out of the larrikin's perfectly recreated [virtual] self. His charismatic nature shines among a cast of

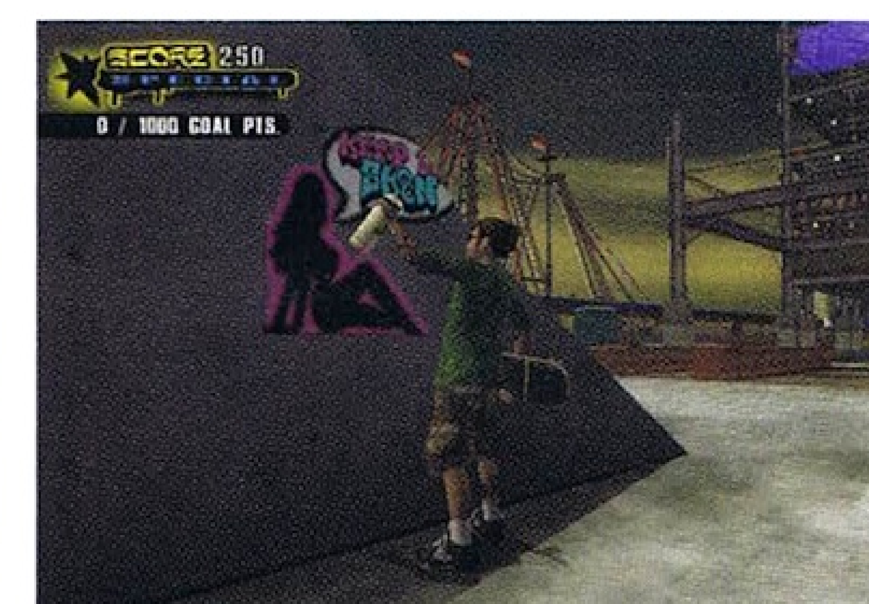












Tagging, that's new… To this series. Of course, Sega's *Jet Set Radio* titles practically worked off this premise alone.

wooden players, including the game's namesake, one Tony Hawk. What this does for the branding, however, is give a feeling 'Tony Hawk' should be dropped from the title, with magnetic Bam Margera taking up the role of series' mascot.

Level design is possibly the most annoying feature, overall, though. Most levels are merely one large square with a few branching sectors, however, these squares are so encumbered with 'skateable architecture' the real challenge lies in fighting the control pad to line up your skater, or even turn within impediments. This wouldn't be so much of a problem though, if not for the ridiculous speed of the game's characters. Imbalance is a real quandary with skater attributes and can serve as a serious problem when coupled with *THUG 2's* clumsy level design. Unfortunately this mismarriage maintains throughout the game and there is little give in the way of clever lines or multi-tiered pathways. Moreover, the addition of a superfluous day/night system makes for more difficult gaming with darkened areas being harder to see and negotiate.

Even for the truly avid skater, *THUG 2* will be a difficult game to swallow. Objectives are uninspired, requiring little to no skill, often treating players with utter contempt and belittlement - While the visuals, alongside level design, will leave plenty of sore thumbs thumbing for a better, fresher extreme sports experience.

Edge rating: Four out of ten



Danny Way's Pro Skater

While Tony Hawk's name is one of household repute, another skateboarder has been pushing the sport for as long and consistently as Tony Hawk. Danny Way is arguably the worlds greatest skater, holding the records for the longest jump and highest air, which he gained consecutively within the same run. Unlike Tony Hawk, however, you won't find Danny Way endorsing McDonald's, which is why he probably doesn't have his own game.

Pro Evolution 4

Format: **PS2 (version tested), Xbox, PC** Publisher: **Konami** Developer: **In-house** Price: **$99.95 (PC $89.95)** Release: **November**







Just as likely to pop up off a chest or body, leaving a real sitter for a striker to first-time into the back of the net







Push and shove

One of *PES4's* strengths lies in the varying degrees in which a player can lean into an opponent as they vie for control of the ball. Sometimes leaning gently into an opponent as they prepare to take their shot can put a striker off their target, and it's far less likely to draw a foul or card.

Of course, two people can't occupy the same space, and that nudge that had no feeling behind it may send your adversary to the white spot. Just feel your way.



A fancy 'rollercoaster' or such may send this PSV Eindhoven player through, but scenarios like this tend to end realistically, with the defence shutting the man down good and proper



Several years of football fans and gaming journalists screaming atop soapboxes at the masses has seen Konami's innovative *Pro Evolution Soccer* series take a large enough slice of the sales pie to make EA lift their game. Good news for us, bad for EA, *Pro Evolution Soccer 4* proves Konami aren't stumped for improvements and ideas just yet.

PES's key feature has been the intuitive and realistic way the player interacts with the ball. Pushing the controller different directions as player comes into contact with the ball produces greatly varied, yet highly plausible results. Konami have capitalised on these strengths, with *Pro Evo 4* exploiting the same first-touch phenomena even more heavily.

By simply continuing to add more animations for close control, and increasing the sense of momentum slightly, *Pro Evo 4* makes its predecessor seem stilted and structured. For those not obsessed with realism, there are some blatant improvements and touches, such as the introduction of an on-field referee, vastly improved player likenesses, injured folk sometimes return to the field once given the okay by physio, and much more comprehensive match stats.

Computer AI now tends to adopt an Arsenal-like style of free-flowing first touch football. This doesn't make the computer impossible to beat, it simply won't fall for the same tricks repeatedly, and actually looks like today's top-flight play.

Although too many major club names still appear in alternate form to give *PES4* any feel of being a comprehensively licensed game, the player rosters are admirably up to date. Only a few last minute transfers from the current European leagues, such as Wayne Rooney's move from Merseyside to Manchester escaped Konami's deadline.

Master League (career mode) is now far more customable, breaking away from the rags-to-riches policy. Although it'd be too easy to prove satisfying, the player can manage a top-flight club with its current roster, rather than have to lead some unknowns to glory.

Even though the masses will fail to notice the important transparent tweaks, so long as Konami keep making legitimate improvements like these to the *Pro Evo* games, they will continue to give EA both a real headache, and a checklist of features for *FIFA 2006*. This is the soccer-sim you want, and with online play over Xbox Live, it's no longer purely for the PS2 punters.



Edge rating: Eight out of ten

Kingdom Under Fire: The Crusaders

Format: **Xbox** Publisher: **Microsoft** Developer: **Phantagram** Price: **UK£40** Release: **Out now (UK) TBC (AU)**

The Korean connection is unmistakable. Mediocre soft metal accompanies much of the frontend and cinematics, while cut-scenes are replete with the malapropisms and duff phraseology only east/west translations throw up. The voice acting, too, is hammy, all 'British baritone' meets fantasy RPG. Not that any of this takes away from the game's charm, as the framing, plotting and stentorian tone of the cut-scenes lead beautifully into the carnage on the battlefield. *Kingdom Under Fire* is nothing if not brave.

On the surface this may just be an old PC game converted for console gamers, but the new mixture of party management, tactics and thirdperson combat gives it a greater energy and variety. Early missions ease you into the flow, and selecting units and sending them to their destinations is executed by pressing left trigger and button combinations. The right trigger enhances an overhead view of the battlefield, but this obscures the action. Once an enemy is engaged it's possible to duke it out *Dynasty Warriors*-style, and the thirdperson action is surprisingly sturdy, while the clash of metal against bone and the confusion, blood and carnage of close combat has been captured spectacularly.

Yet there's a clumsiness about the frontend that undermines the good work done elsewhere. After a mission success it's back to the barracks for some obligatory upgrading of skills and purchasing of equipment. The wealth of options impresses, from building up individual units to providing magical protection to your heroes. However, missions often need to be triggered by static and inane conversations with supporting characters. And it's not that moving units across the overhead map is cumbersome, it just looks amateurish. Buy the wrong gear or fail to upgrade to match the (unknowable) tactical demands of a mission and you can find yourself in a tactical dead end. This is a criticism of many strategy games, but the clunky interface and long loading times make it particularly infuriating here.

Despite these imperfections, *KUF* is deep and rewarding enough to appeal to hardened armchair strategists, and the addition of a vigorous thirdperson combat engine makes this special enough to deserve your interest. Orcs and trolls may not give it broad appeal, but Phantagram's effort deserves as much attention as anything based on Peter Jackson's Lord Of The Rings movies.

Edge rating: Seven out of ten









Archers can torch enemies in woodland with flame arrows while sappers can set traps for marauding bad guys. Every unit has several specific skills, allowing missions to be completed using creative decison making







Other heroes can be unlocked but Gerald's balance of might and magic, and his verbal outbursts on the battlefield, make him the most appealing. In-game cut-scenes set up the action wonderfully



Clash of the titans

Online clashes are initially sweaty and desperate bouts between units. Take glory on the battlefield, though, and experience soon racks up allowing your hero to recruit more specialised unit types and increasing the tactical avenues available. As in the singleplayer campaign, environment details have to be taken into consideration. It's always better to fight with the sun on your back, and a height advantage can tip a conflict your way. As ever, Opti-match puts you into games against opponents of similar experience.

Star Wars Battlefront

Format: **PS2 (version tested), Xbox, PC** Publisher: **LucasArts** Developer: **Pandemic Studios** Price: **$99.95** Release: **Out now**







Ordering other troops around you makes your job easier, and decent artificial intelligence means computer-controlled characters are always on the move. Beware the Destroyer droid (top right)



That ol' Star Wars feeling is easy to fire up in any devoted fan. All you need is the right audio. A blaster shot, a ten-second clip of the theme, and you're back in short trousers, gaping at the screen. But keeping up the momentum through repetitive levels and cardboard 'extended universe' characters is a different feat altogether.

With *Star Wars Battlefront*, LucasArts makes good on its very public promise to provide only top-quality gaming for the franchise. This is no gritty reimagining of the saga a la *Republic Commando*, nor is it a simplistic grab-bag of Star Wars 'moments', although they're in here too. Instead, *Battlefront* recreates almost every land battle from all six films, with the player taking on the role of a trooper from the rebel, clone, droid or imperial armies. And in spite (or perhaps because) of the lack of story, it also offers the most authentic, romantic Star Wars experience since that first well-loved arcade cabinet way back in '83. (Cutely, *Battlefront*'s frontend menus are stripped down and vectorised in much the same way.)

Los Angeles studio Pandemic had a tightrope walk between delivering gameplay and staying true to the Star Wars world. And it's pulled off the near-perfect balancing act between the familiar form and robust gameplay function. For once, we can play a Star Wars game in which very few gaps have had to be filled. Everything does just what it's meant to: all vehicles can be piloted, from speeder bikes to giant assault units, and the waves of soldiers give the impression of large-scale battles. Obvious concessions to online fighting are commendably few. (Health and ammo boosts are handled by familiar droids scattered around the battlefield, so even powering up doesn't feel too forced.)

Aerial craft are one casualty of the balancing process, with snail-like reloading speeds and ponderous controls. But, just like every other aspect of *Battlefront*, when used at the right time and place they can change the course of a battle. You can almost feel the months of playtesting that whipped the game into its finished state. Not bad, considering Lucas never had to worry about balancing forces when he set his ragtag rebels against the Empire's industrial might.

Offline, the robust controls and a constant level of action mean singleplayer mode isn't the write-off it is in many online games – including the main inspiration here, *Battlefield 1942*. In fact, playing alone feels like a demented, squad-based version of a traditional shooter, albeit with an over-the-shoulder or thirdperson view. Endless respawns help you grab waypoints for ultimate victory, and a Risk-like Galactic Conquest mode satisfactorily fills out the action. But it's online where the game really shines, with vehicles encouraging team play and the differing soldier types coming into their own. Choosing to be a pilot or sniper rather than a heavy weapons expert or ordinary trooper makes so much more sense with real-life teammates by your side.

The battle for Hoth stands out as a classic example of gameplay. The dodgy



As you'd expect, the many vehicles on offer deliver varied experiences. You'll learn to love some and avoid others

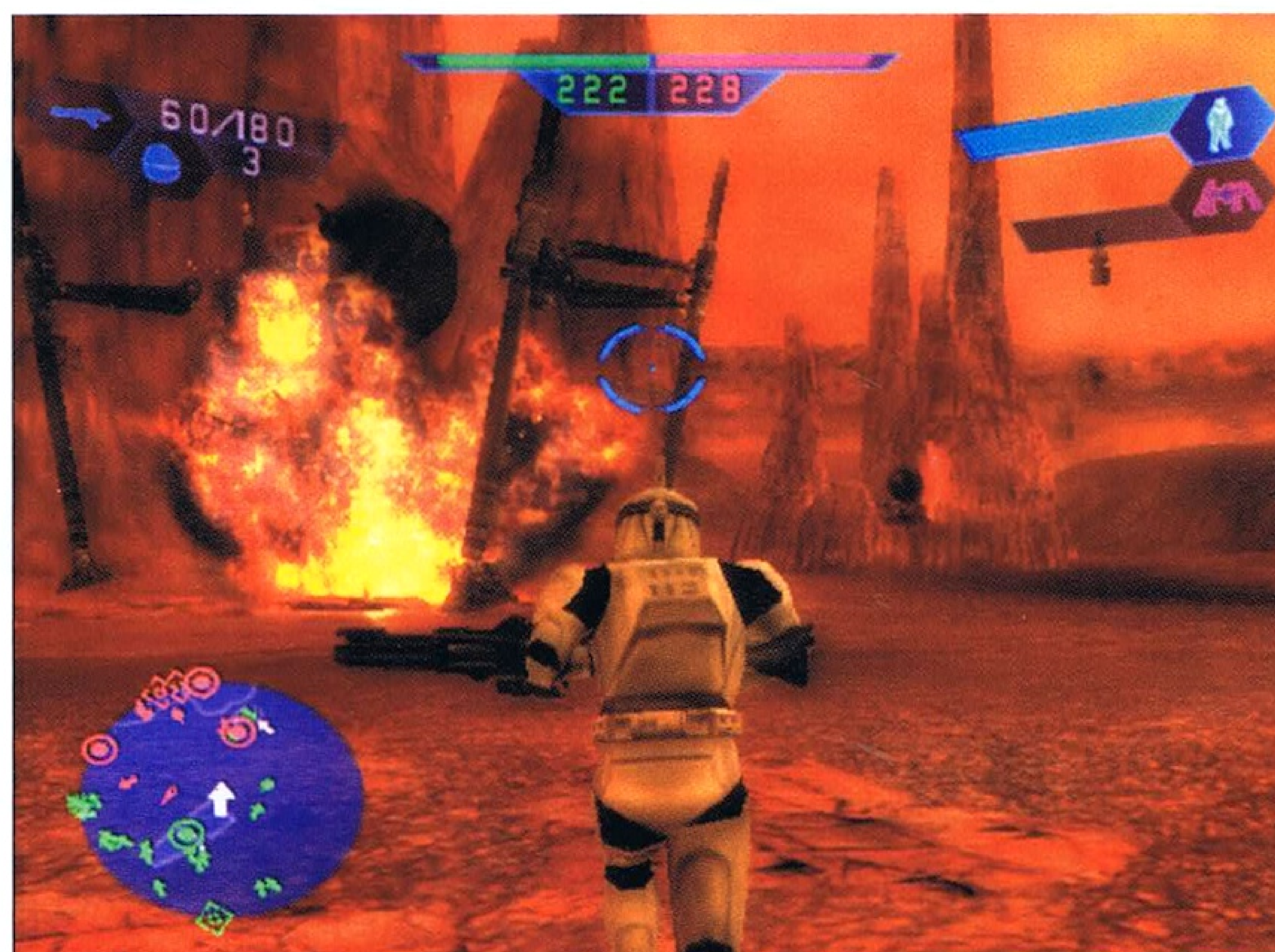
With Star Wars Battlefront, LucasArts makes good on its very public promise to provide only top-quality gaming for the franchise













Big guns are essential for taking on vehicles, but every character has a secondary weapon for more general fire, and most carry grenades



stop-motion animation on a loping Tauntaun is true to the original movie, but the animals are also an indispensable way of getting across the tundra. AT-ATs keep their spidery, elephantine stomp, but they're not quite the battle-ending beasts you might imagine, and even the lacklustre droid army from The Phantom Menace feels suitably beefy. On the other hand, the squawking Gungans and Ewoks are just asking to be taken out.

While the arenas subtly suggest combat narratives which play out differently every time, *Battlefront* isn't quite as varied as it might have been. The extra goals on each map are unimportant compared to capturing waypoints, and every soldier's life is usually limited to a death-or-glory assault. The 16 maps from ten planets vary from involving (Tatooine) to occasionally bland (Naboo), but many online games get by with less.

Aside from the inevitable sequel, this may well be the last great Star Wars game. Online PS2 players are certainly likely to be seduced away from the underwhelming *SOCOM II*, and Xbox owners will embrace an alternative to *Halo*. Those accustomed to the adult world of online PC gaming may have reason to sniff at the more streamlined play, but Pandemic has given consoles a whole new genre, pretty much perfectly formed. But then maybe there's a simpler reason for *Battlefront*'s immediate appeal – no game has ever felt quite so much like playing with Star Wars figures.

Edge rating: Eight out of ten

Dark side rising

In Galactic Conquest mode, every planet conquered brings a new advantage into play, from improved aiming to enemy radar spamming. An automatic favourite is Jedi Hero, bringing the game's only Force-using characters on screen in the form of Count Dooku, Luke Skywalker and his bad dad. The Jedi may be the showiest fighters, but every character boasts accomplished animation – another example of the graphical thoroughness that adds considerably to *Battlefront*'s charm.

Uo: Legend Of Seven Waters And Gods

Format: **PlayStation2** Publisher: **SCEI** Developer: **SCEI/Sega Wow** Price: **¥6,800 ($85)** Release: **Out now (Japan), TBC (AU)**















Expressive animation and enthusiastic voice acting impart much of the story regardless of the language barrier, but a more import-friendly proposition may be Natsume's proposed American localisation, unfortunately redubbed *Finny The Fish*

Uo could be Sega Wow's act of karmic repentance for *Get Bass* – the other side of the story and the waterline, a dreamlike underwater fantasy occasionally spoiled by the vulgarity of an angler's line from which to wriggle free. With gleeful irony, the older title's catalogue of glittering lures is recycled not as tools of the trade, but as trophies earned for being the one that got away.

A fish of few words and an apparently bottomless stomach, Uo's quest plays out as a more forgiving, candy-striped version of *Ecco: Defender Of The Future*, although a merciless timed challenge and clumsy, often unfair combat will raise the same frustrations. Each stretch of river is home to an animal spirit with a task to fulfil, sending Uo leaping up waterfalls, riding rushing currents and locking fins with exaggeratedly grotesque predators en route.

But the greatest threat isn't these predators, or even the suitably unseen and idle menace of the fishermen whose lines require a bout of frantic thrashing to escape. It's instead Uo's insatiable hunger, with the constant issue of dipping into the local fish, insect and crustacean smorgasbord producing a cleverly barbed dynamic – as the search becomes more desperate, you're more likely to unthinkingly lunge at a tantalising lure.

Uo's chief delights, though, largely come from the lazy flow of exploration, plotting each new bend of its increasingly eccentric waterways: it's a theme played on in the introductory fly-by, offering fleeting glimpses of what lies just a little further downstream. From the shallows dappled by the afternoon sun to the still subterranean lakes, there's a vibrancy that ensures progress is a pleasure and backtracking is seldom a chore – in fact, the game is often at its best when you're free from the demands of unlocking the next section and simply revelling in your buoyant weightlessness.

This sensation is beautifully judged, enough to cover for the otherwise conservative point-to-point gameplay that could have been a considerably clunkier affair as a landfaring platformer. And while *Uo*'s reliance on uncomplicated whimsy may not be to everyone's tastes, the appearance of a good-natured, honestly affable game when it seemed SCEI's reliable reservoir of the stuff was slowing to an indifferently received trickle is something to celebrate.

Edge rating: Six out of ten

Amazing Island

Format: GameCube Publisher: Sega Developer: In-house Price: US$39.95 Release: Out now (US), TBC (AU)

Amazing Island should have been one of the moments when games grew up – a dazzling game full of child-like delight which broadened and matured gaming's appeal. Instead, you're left with the overwhelming sensation of a Christmas present with no batteries to go in it.

The amazing thing about Sega's island is supposed to be that you can draw your own monsters. Once you've settled on a design, the game breathes life into them and they then represent you on a quest to defeat evil, which takes the form of a raft of minigames. The scope of the game is very limited: one island, several dozen minigames and an initial completion time of just a few hours. Once those hours are complete, you have an entertaining toolset at your disposal that will last as long as your interest.

It's a promising set-up, but one that's flawed at nearly every level. The minigames range from the banal to the baffling, with only a couple of standout delights. Many feel like the designers have taken a look at some *Mario Party* classics and then set aside a week to figure out how to break them. Structurally, the game all too often punishes you for its own failings in explaining the odd controls, and it's easy to become dispirited by a game which ought to inspire. For a game clearly aimed at children, it's an odd choice.

The monster-drawing system makes a bold attempt to hold your hand – removing the stage fright a blank piece of paper can give nervous doodlers. Instead, you pick from a frame – human, dog-like, dragon-like – and edit it. Once complete, the blank form of your creature is fixed and you can set about adding patterns, faces and weapons. Splitting the process in two is clearly supposed to streamline it, but instead it infuriates since it strangles the kind of creative improvisation that should be the game's greatest strength. Similarly, the frames soon become limiting frustrations, things that must be subverted in order to gain the freedom you want. Elaborate results are still possible, but you'll have your own industriousness to thank, not the game.

Magic Pengel still stands as the benchmark for the drawing game, providing flexibility, freedom and inspiration in a world that felt rich and alive. Its gameplay and structure, however, were lacking and *Amazing Island* could have been the game to perfect the balance. It hasn't.

Edge rating: Four out of ten











The game supports up to four players, but to play specific events you'll need to endure a torturous set-up procedure every single round





Frames, such as this rabbit, are only starting points for your creations. If you want to make a wheeled monster, you might need to draw tiny stunted legs as attachment points, even if you don't want them



Linkin' park

Once you've created a monster you must take its photo. Link up a GBA to the GC and this photo becomes a downloadable monster card, allowing you to detach your GBA and challenge your friends to a simplistic Pokémon-lite fight. It's a nice touch, and better presented than much of the main game. Victory unlocks new skills for GBA battles, as well as new ready-made monsters you can try out in the main game.

Evil Genius

Format: **PC** Publisher: **Vivendi** Developer: **Elixir Studios** Price: **$69.95** Release: **Out now**











Evil Genius' visuals are clean and consistent, but not as charming as something like *The Sims*. The '60s spy movie presentation is packed with humour and ironic asides



While the genius is little more than a figurehead, minions receive stat bonuses from the presence of their master. Tired lackeys lacking motivation can be quickly fixed by a meandering boss



Tag, you're dead

Intruders on the island have, by default, a neutral status. Minions and henchmen will ignore them unless directly attacked or ordered to intervene by the use of tags. These might order them to weaken a character, to capture them or perhaps dispatch them entirely. Occasionally it will be necessary to completely ignore intruders so that they can be used to unwittingly aid the genius in his nefarious plans.



After the unusual and expensive misfire of creativity that was *Republic: The Revolution*, it's heartening to see that Elixir's second game strikes a better balance of accessibility, creativity and entertainment. *Evil Genius* is the kind of management title that should be bread and butter for PC gaming.

This is *Dungeon Keeper* with a broader vision. The evil genius in question is one of three Bond-style supervillains who must manage their underground lair while struggling to achieve world domination through crime campaigns and, ultimately, the use and abuse of various doomsday devices. The action is divided between these two tasks, with the base-building being managed in a top-down 3D map and the world-ransoming being handled on a simplified global overview.

Progress is near perfect in its escalation of reward and complexity. There's a steady influx of new toys to play with and new enemies to send to their deaths amid blaring emergency sirens. The island base is under constant siege from the forces of justice, and balancing security with nefarious deeds becomes a keen challenge. Skilled henchmen help ease the burden, while your minions are as stupid as in Hollywood and must be carefully manipulated, or even maliciously executed, to ensure the smooth running of the base.

But there are problems: there's no real interest to be had in the acts of infamy you must undertake, and the tacked-on hotel-building cover plot is flaccid. This latter feature seems unnecessary and clumsily implemented, like an idea too far. A larger crime, perhaps, is that the actual personae of the geniuses are neglected and they're never given room to be involved in the action or even sit back and gloat. Less an evil genius, more an alienated manager. Worse, there are balancing problems, including staggeringly frustrating attacks which seem to render your clever security pointless. Nevertheless, the video-driven tutorials and help menu systems are pleasingly straightforward. Most actions that aren't explained are so intuitive as to be no trouble at all, and the interaction with base and minions only occasionally frustrates.

While there are awkward moments on this malignant management escapade, it's never less than charming. The exaggerated '60s spy-movie design is familiar and entertainingly fresh, and although flawed, it's still far more appealing than *Republic*. It seems likely to put Elixir on the road to better things.

Edge rating: **Seven** out of **ten**

Colin McRae Rally 2005

Format: **PC, PS2, Xbox (version tested)** Publisher: **Codemasters** Developer: **In-house** Price: **$99.95** Release: **Out now**

Codemasters is no doubt deciding whether to stick or twist with one of its best-known properties. See, McRae himself hasn't had a World Rally Championship seat for the last two seasons, and now takes part in Wacky Races-inspired events like the Dakar Rally for Nissan. This 2005 outing isn't based on anything quite so extravagant and is so similar to last year's outing as to be embarrassing. McRae's lack of TV exposure and gradual career slide can't be good for business. Indeed, the last time he won the championship upon which this game is based was back in 1995.

One major addition in this annual update is an eightplayer online mode, and while this provides all the multiplayer competitive thrills you'd expect, it's come very late to the table. *Project Gotham 2*, *RalliSport Challenge 2* and Codemasters' own *V8 Supercars 2* all offer similar online modes, and with fierce competition from *Burnout 3*, and *GT4* and *Forza Motorsport* on the way, you have to worry about the franchise's future.

Other differences are cosmetic. An updated physics engine records scrapes and smashes with greater authenticity; spectators wave (though their cardboard-cutout appearance is still comically evident); some roadside objects, like hay bales and rocks, now shift if hit, and bushes and trees drop leaves should your chassis rub against them. There's even a motion-blur effect, presumably to signify a dazed state, if you smash into a solid object head on. But this smattering of extra make-up doesn't make you feel like you're playing something fresh.

It was interesting to see SCi go down the focused simulation route with its own *Richard Burns Rally* title. While *Colin McRae 2005* offers a more palatable drive, clearly aimed at all age and experience groups, it would have been braver to see an additional simulation mode complete with strict engine failures, time penalties and retirements for those looking for a more exacting experience. It's also curious to find a game free from the constraints of an official WRC licence with tame course designs lacking elevation, imagination and the perilous cliff edges that make the sport so exciting.

Ironically, the fifth in the *Colin McRae* series is still a fine game if – and here's the major caveat – you didn't play last year's update. Those who did will get more fun out of playing spot the difference.

Edge rating: Six out of ten









Power steering can be engaged by pressing the Y button. Collide with a tree and you'll be treated to the sight of gently falling leaves







Car deformation is excellent, with every panel now reacting to knocks and smashes. The visuals are the best yet seen in any rally title. Problem is, there can be few gamers left who have not sampled the familiar McRae formula

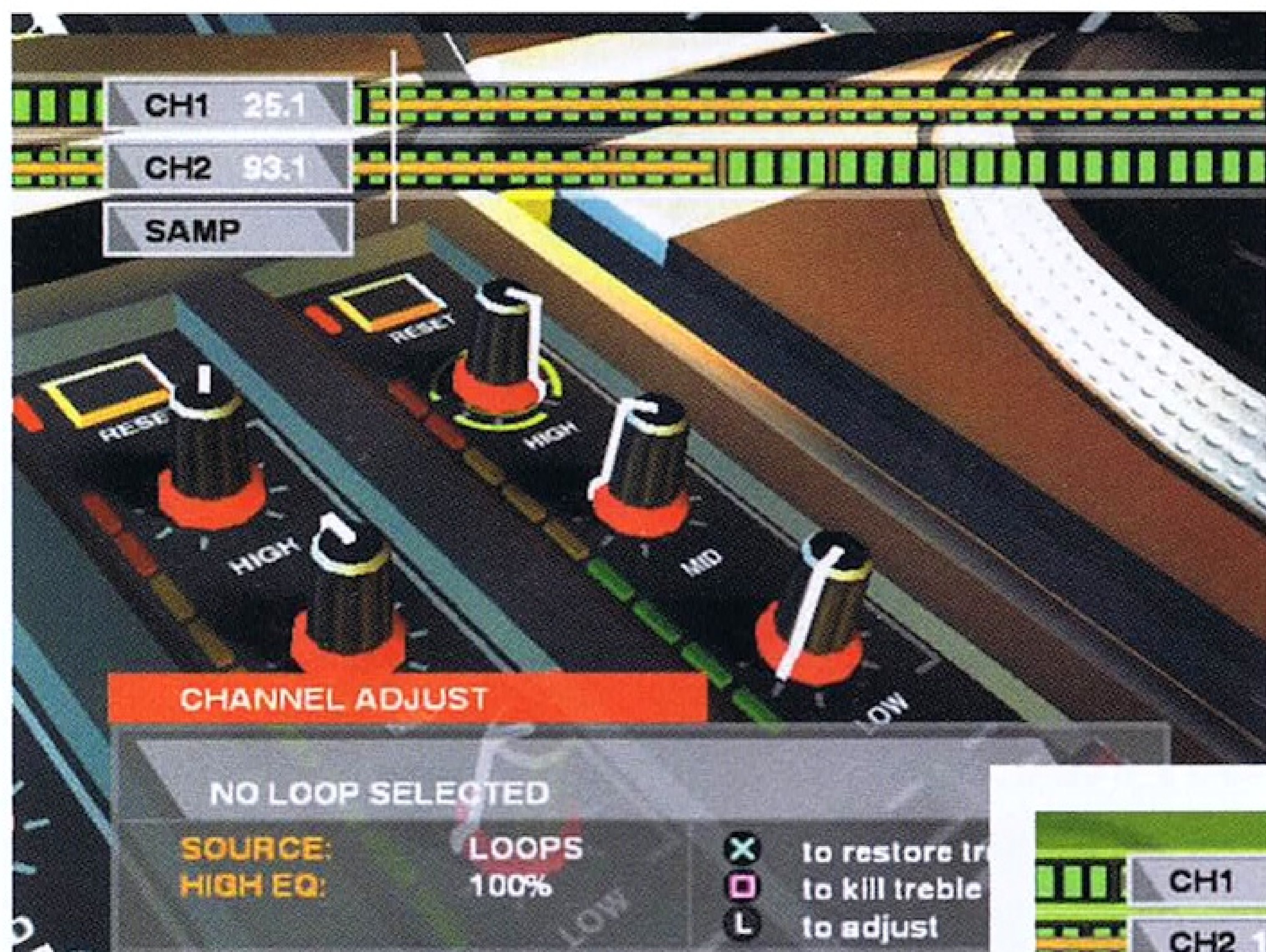


Careers advice

The Championship mode is, frankly, a bit dull, but this 2005 edition is boosted with a Career mode that gives your rallying a greater sense of purpose. You start off with underpowered two-wheel-drive vehicles, but eventually unlock bigger and more interesting beasts like the Toyota Celica GT-FOUR, the Mitsubishi Lancer Evo VIII and McRae's beloved new 4x4 Nissan Pickup-Dakar. It's all played out across the same nine worldwide locations, of course, but at least you feel like your efforts are being rewarded.

DJ: Decks & FX

Format: **PlayStation2** Publisher: **SCEE** Developer: **Relentless** Price: **$99.95** Release: **Out now**

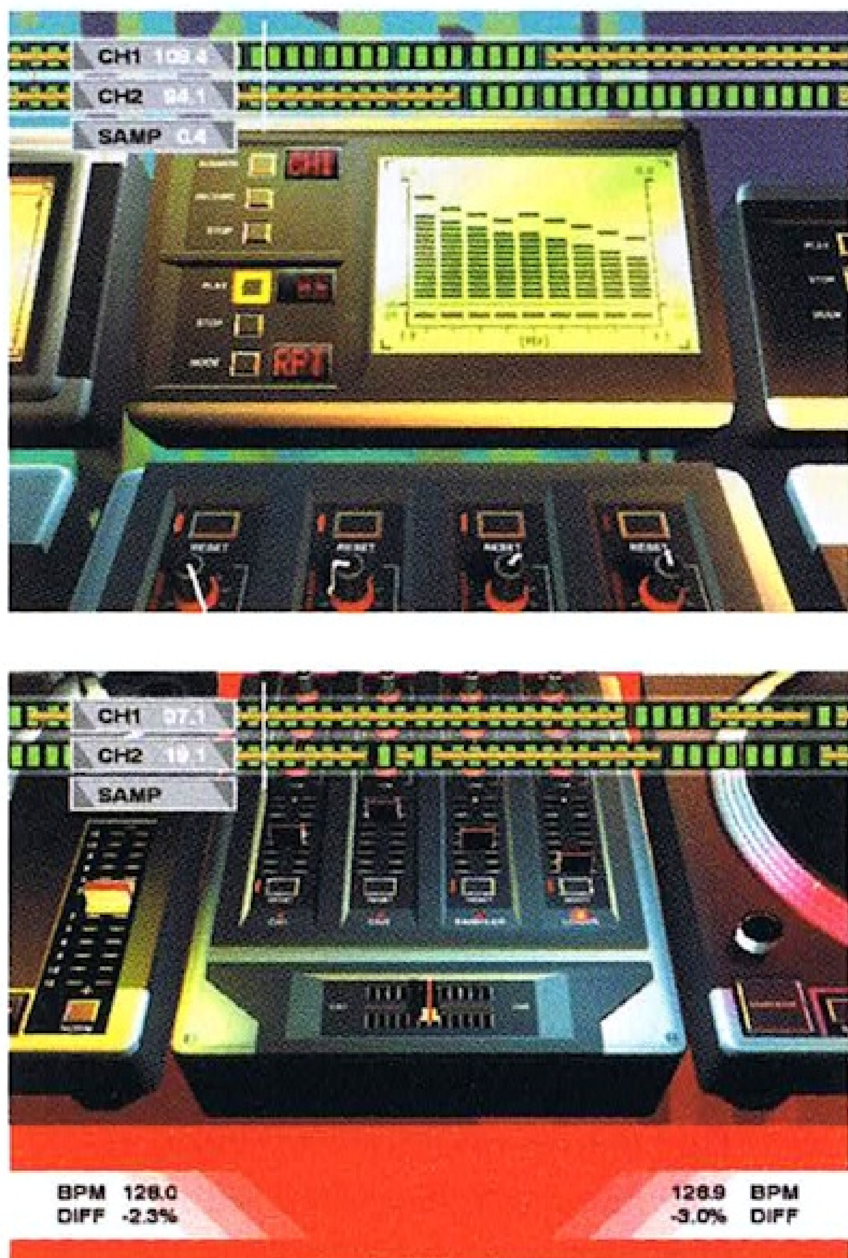








Knob-fiddling is one of the more creative and satisfying ways to use the software: a mix is tangibly energised by a sudden bass kick





The cross fader can be smoothly moved with a stick, and the equipment looks like the real thing and works in much the same way. Everything, that is, except the record bag, which remains sadly static

Edge doesn't review music. The appreciation and analysis of videogames can be subjective enough without having to consider the complex emotional response to music. It's therefore probably best to make it clear from the start that our musical tastes do not include Judge Jules-esque MOR house.

This is perhaps a shame as, musically speaking, that's all *DJ: Decks & FX* has to offer. Otherwise, it does exactly what its name would suggest, providing would-be DJs with a pair of decks, a selection of effects and a bag of records. Rather than interpreting the *idea* of mixing tunes and making new music from the mixing, *DJ: Decks & FX* is instead an utterly literal translation of a real-world DJ set up.

Virtual records are placed on virtual decks, and any difference in beats per minute are accounted for automatically. Indicators at the top of the screen show the progression of the records bar by bar, allowing the tracks' start points to be matched visually as well as by ear. Meanwhile a sampler allows for sections of the music currently playing to be stored and repeated indefinitely.

There are a handful of effects (flange, pan, filters and so on) that can be comprehensively controlled and applied to any of the channels, along with a mixer with equalisers and kill switches that is exactly the same in form and function to the real article.

And it all works perfectly well. Navigation is smooth, and where appropriate the analogue sticks are used to simulate the movement of knobs and sliders. There are no issues with the technical implementation here: the problem lies in the banal and limited selection of records on offer. It's bland house or nothing, and as there's no option to add new tunes to a hard drive, unless you have a love for the narrow selection on offer, it's nigh-on useless.

It's difficult to make a judgement on this title as it's both utterly niche and absolutely perfectly realised. The complete lack of musical variety can easily be seen as a limitation of the software – all the included songs are of an extremely similar BPM and identical time signature, as variation would have made the automatic beat matching significantly more difficult.

Ultimately, *DJ: Decks & FX* is little more than an interactive mix album, and an unadventurous one at that. We'll have to see how the property is developed.

Edge rating: Five out of ten

U-Move Super Sports

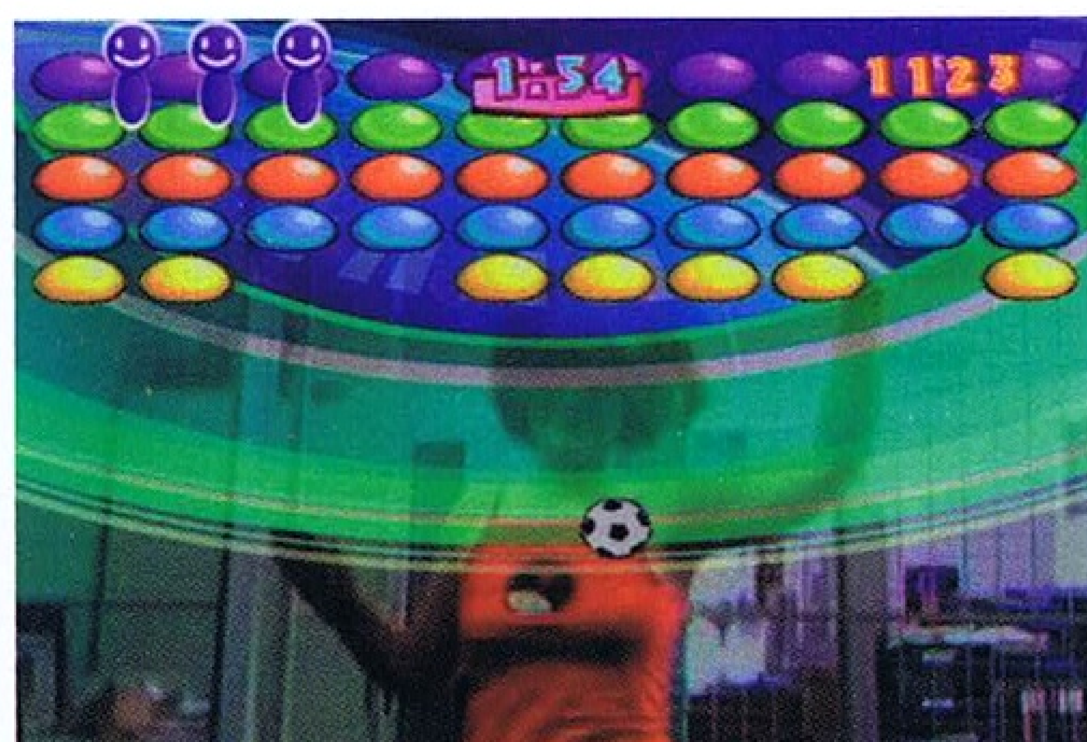
Format: **PlayStation2 (EyeToy required)** Publisher: **Konami** Developer: **In-house** Price: **$69.95** Release: **Out now**

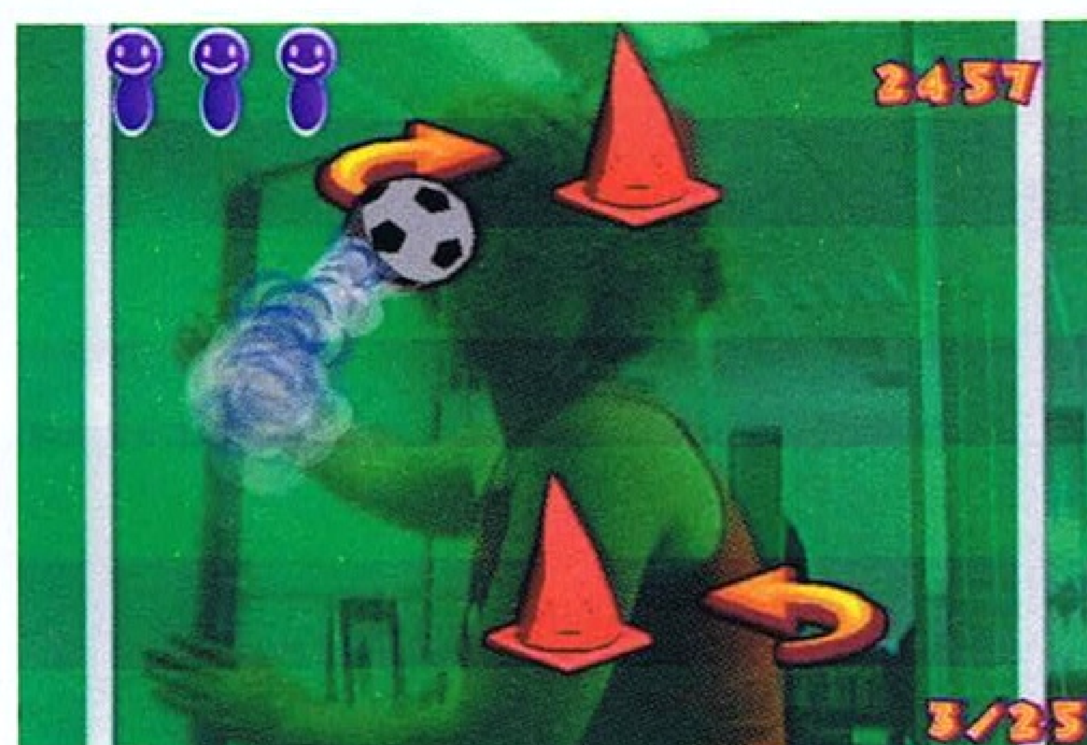
Eye Toy: *Play*'s success brought with it a clear genre opening. With the camera in over three million homes across PAL regions, third party publishers were presented with the opportunity to build on Sony's success. This is Konami's attempt at that, a collection of sport-themed minigames which doesn't so much build on *Play* as rip off the concept wholesale. So, the player stands in front of the camera, things move around on screen, and the player (usually) tries to touch them. And so on, until the player falls over or onlookers die laughing.

As with *Play*, some of *U-Move*'s games are better than others. The one that sees you playing baseball is well executed, particularly if you've got an empty tube of Pringles to hand; the saving penalties one is good, simple, stupid, fun. Most, though, are far too easy, and maybe that's because (going by the front-of-box screenshots, at least) *U-Move* is aimed squarely at children. That's not to say it's bad – even when *Play* was at its simplest, it was still fun, particularly with those laughing friends – but it's certainly a difficult purchase to justify if you already own *Play*.



Edge rating: Five out of ten









Like *Play* and *Groove* before it, *U-Move* works on motion detection, rather than colour recognition. Difficulty depends largely on your lighting – if your world's dimly lit, expect to do a lot of violent waving to score even a handful of points

Ape Escape EyeToy

Format: **PlayStation2 (EyeToy required)** Publisher: **SCEI** Developer: **In-house** Price: **¥6,800 ($86)** Release: **Out now (Japan), TBC (AU)**





The graphics are impeccable, using the waving-in-circles input cues from *Play*, while much of each menu screen carries irrelevant but satisfying interaction opportunities, and the characterisation is of the high standard we've come to expect from the *Ape Escape* team





At least this month's other EyeToy game, *Ape Escape EyeToy*, has the good grace to steal from two different places. The *Play*-style pick-a-minigame element is still present, but the central part of the experience is a multiplayer *Mario Party* clone. It's a solid dynamic, if thoroughly pointless and soulless with only one player – that's a criticism that could be levelled at *Play*, too, and as such the addition of coherent competition is a positive thing.

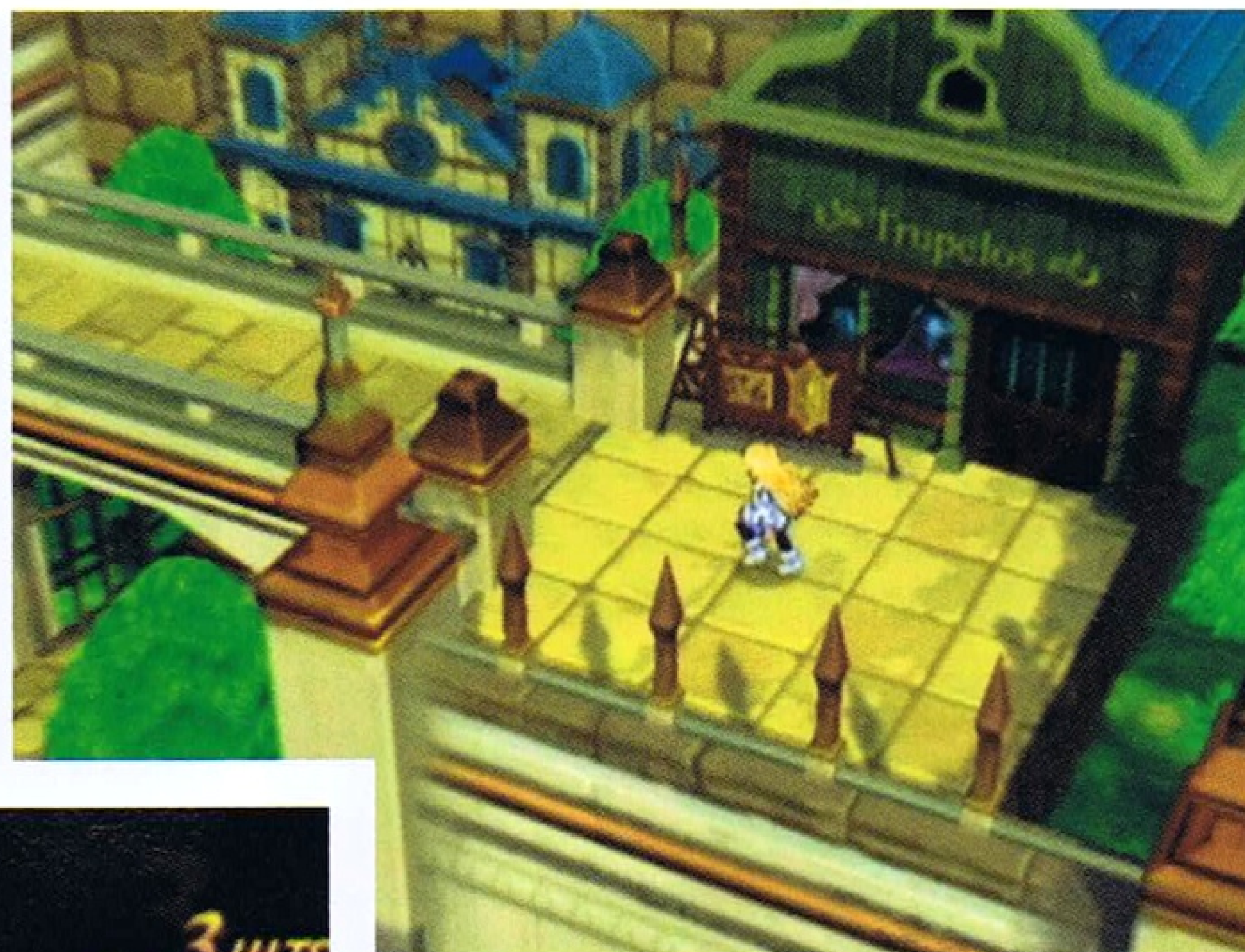
The minigames, of which there are 30, are fractionally less developed than *Play*'s, but no less entertaining and must be unlocked by competing in the board game, which may prove a chore. Different approaches to the camera-as-input ethic include *Track & Field*-style races (running and hurdling logs) and steering a rolling boulder around a winding course. There's also simultaneous multiplayer competition, which in fourplayer means serious crowding around the screen. It sort of works, in a stupid, chaotic kind of way, which is fine because these games are about stupid chaos, and *Ape Escape* is different enough from its rivals to warrant interest from regular party gamers.

Edge rating: Seven out of ten

Tales Of Symphonia

Format: **GameCube** Publisher: **Namco** Developer: **In-house** Price: **$99.95** Release: **Out now (US), Q4 (AU)**















The game supports up to four players, who can slot in and out throughout your adventure. It's a slightly fiddly and dismally unexplained process, however, and the camera doesn't cope at all well

Early on in *Tales Of Symphonia*, you'll start to get the feeling it's played more RPGs than you have. "Oh, man," sighs Lloyd at the end of another dungeon. "Can't they just warp us back to the exit?" His companions eye him narrowly, but you'll chuckle in recognition. It's a dangerous step, however, because it makes it harder to forgive when the game falls back on lazy genre standards.

As is traditional in the *Tales* series, this is a game based around active, realtime battles. Leave your companions on autopilot, and take control of your favourite: leaping, blocking and comboing to bring the bad guy down. Which isn't to say that you sacrifice any of the classic RPG battle tactics. There are elaborate AI settings to tweak, elemental resistance to consider, moves to power up and unison attacks to plan. Much of this can be altered in battle, so the rhythm bounces between all-out hacking and slashing to pensive forward thinking with a flick of the pause button. It's a satisfying and often stunning spectacle, and one which still reveals subtleties hours into the game.

The story, which starts with a predictable quest-in-peril setup, soon expands to genuinely epic proportions, spanning generations and taking in themes of racism and identity. Its telling, however, is hampered by the form. In-engine cut-scenes and odd manga-inspired excerpts add detail and a strong sense of character, but the plot is revealed in awkward lumps which never quite dovetail. There's no question, however, that Namco has managed to twist out a tale that sustains your interest across both discs.

Normally, being needlessly elongated is the kiss of death for RPGs, but *Symphonia* lasts the distance. Each dungeon has a wonderfully distinct visual style as well as a unique puzzle system, which is as likely to depend on summoning helper fish as detonating rockfalls. However, the challenges themselves aren't always perfectly pitched – alongside those that perplex just enough there are many that swing between the blandly obvious and the bafflingly obtuse.

All this makes it galling when the game sends you on needless fetch-and-carry missions, when early exploration earns you a 'we can't go here now' and when the menu system reveals its frustrations. Ultimately, though, Namco has played – or at least made – more RPGs than you have, and here, for once, it shows. 

Edge rating: Eight out of ten

Conflict: Vietnam

Format: PC, PS2 (version tested), Xbox Publisher: SCi Developer: Pivotal Games Price: $99.95 (PC $89.95) Release: Out now

There are differences between *Conflict: Vietnam* and the previous two *Conflict: Desert Storm* games, the kind you expect. Parched, open-plan desert landscapes are replaced by tight jungle. Cool professionalism and surgical campaigns are replaced by hysteria, profanity, licensed music, bungled offensives and numerous ambushes. And the look of such a leafy, verdant battlefield has been captured well, with lush, tangled corridors of plants and huge, protruding leaves brushing against your squad as they skulk in the undergrowth. It's not technically spectacular, but the layers of impenetrable foliage and excellent sound design help give the game a humid and cloying atmosphere.

But the appeal of the *Desert Storm* games lies in the combination of reliable squad behaviour and a palpable sense of being able to apply strategy simply and effectively – laying down fields of fire, gaining ground and covering the angles – and it's this fluid functionality that seems to have been lost in *Conflict*'s latest tour of duty; it's still there, but rarely allowed to come into use.

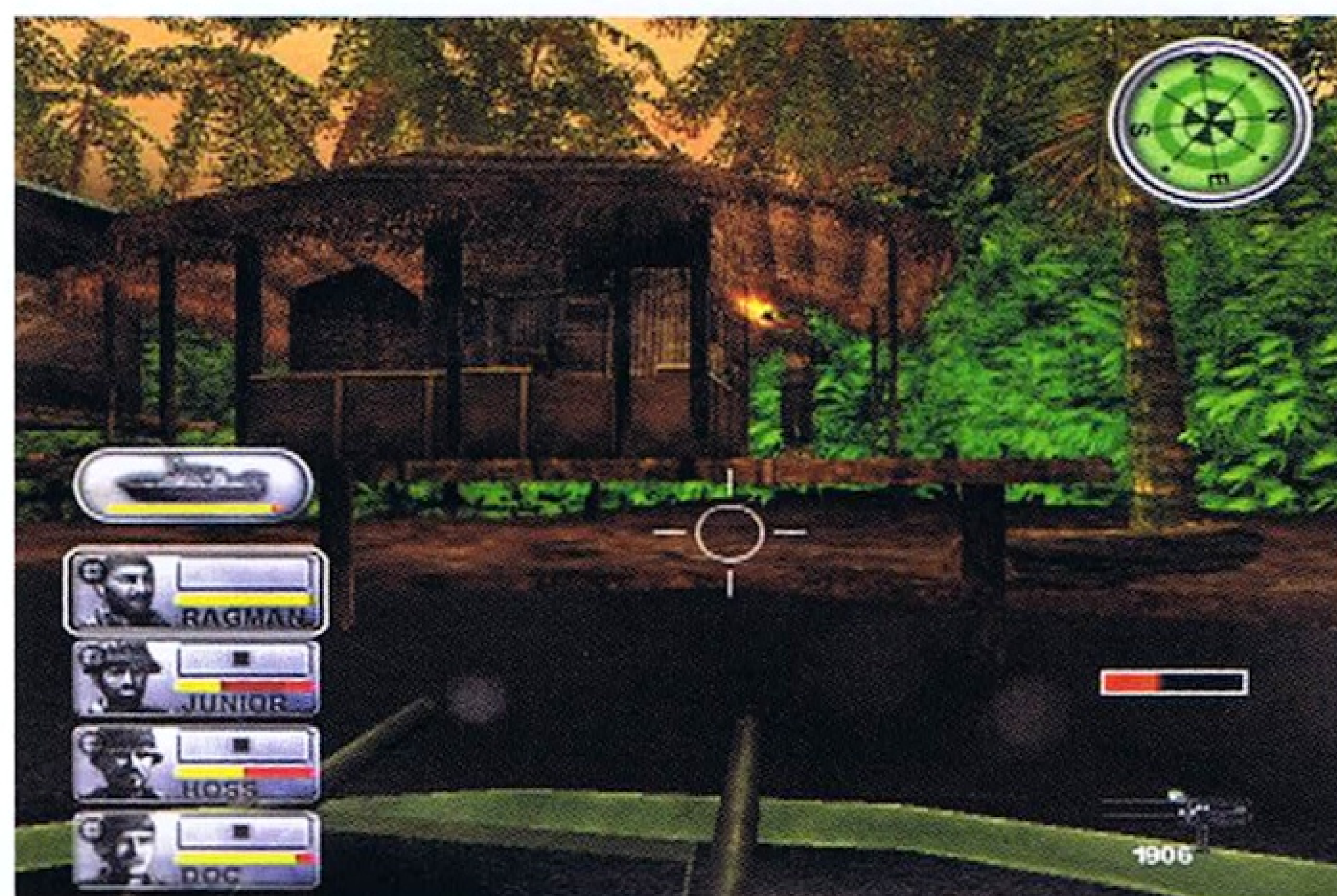
Your team spends most of each level being funnelled along narrow jungle paths. It may be a fitting setting, but it's one that doesn't lend itself much to strategy. Groups of Viet Cong seem to spawn from every angle nigh-on continuously and, while your soldiers follow orders quickly and efficiently, they seem to be unable to take down an enemy in the middle distance without spending an entire clip. Again, this may be faithful to the firearms of the time, but this not only leads to ammo running dry all too quickly, but also a reluctance to split up your team as they seem unable to fortify any position singlehandedly.

The pacing, thanks to a combination of necessary haste and the weakness of your divided squad members, feels more akin to a corridor shooter; there's a constant sensation of feeling harried and hemmed in. Again, it fits the setting, but doesn't play to the strengths of the game's framework. There are moments when the sturdiness of that framework surfaces, and it becomes hugely enjoyable, but all too quickly it recedes, lost in the noise of deliberately unwieldy, insurmountable situations. With too much of the game reduced to what feels like a chain of frustrating pushes, then, scratch up one more victory for the thorny territory of the Vietnam war, and one more casualty (see *ShellShock Nam '67*) for videogames.

Edge rating: Five out of ten



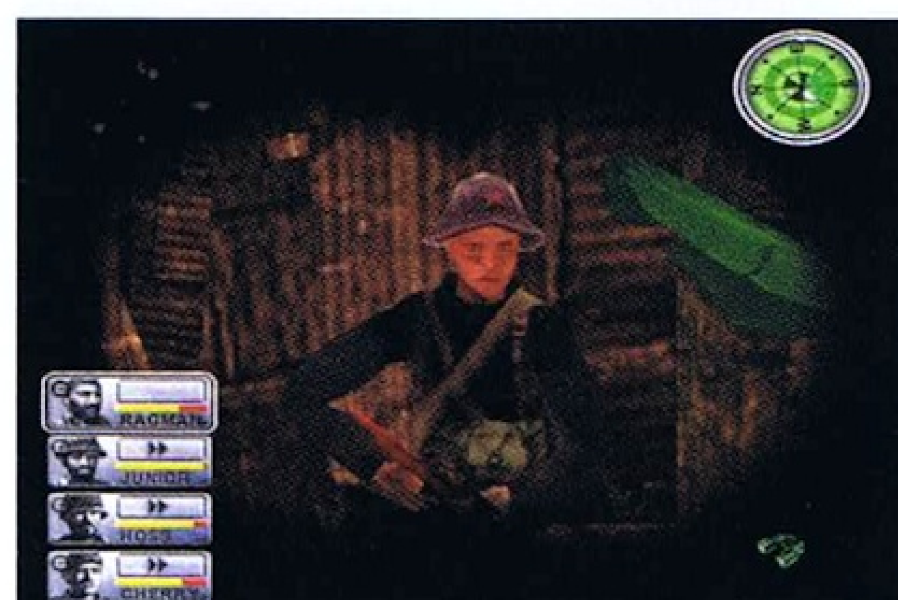






Booby traps feature, and must be disarmed to allow the squad to progress. Bonus objectives also emerge as you progress, allowing you to perform duties in return for more experience





Just as the game redeems itself with an excellent down-river section – all four soldiers manning a mounted gun on an armoured boat – it throws a frustrating escort mission your way



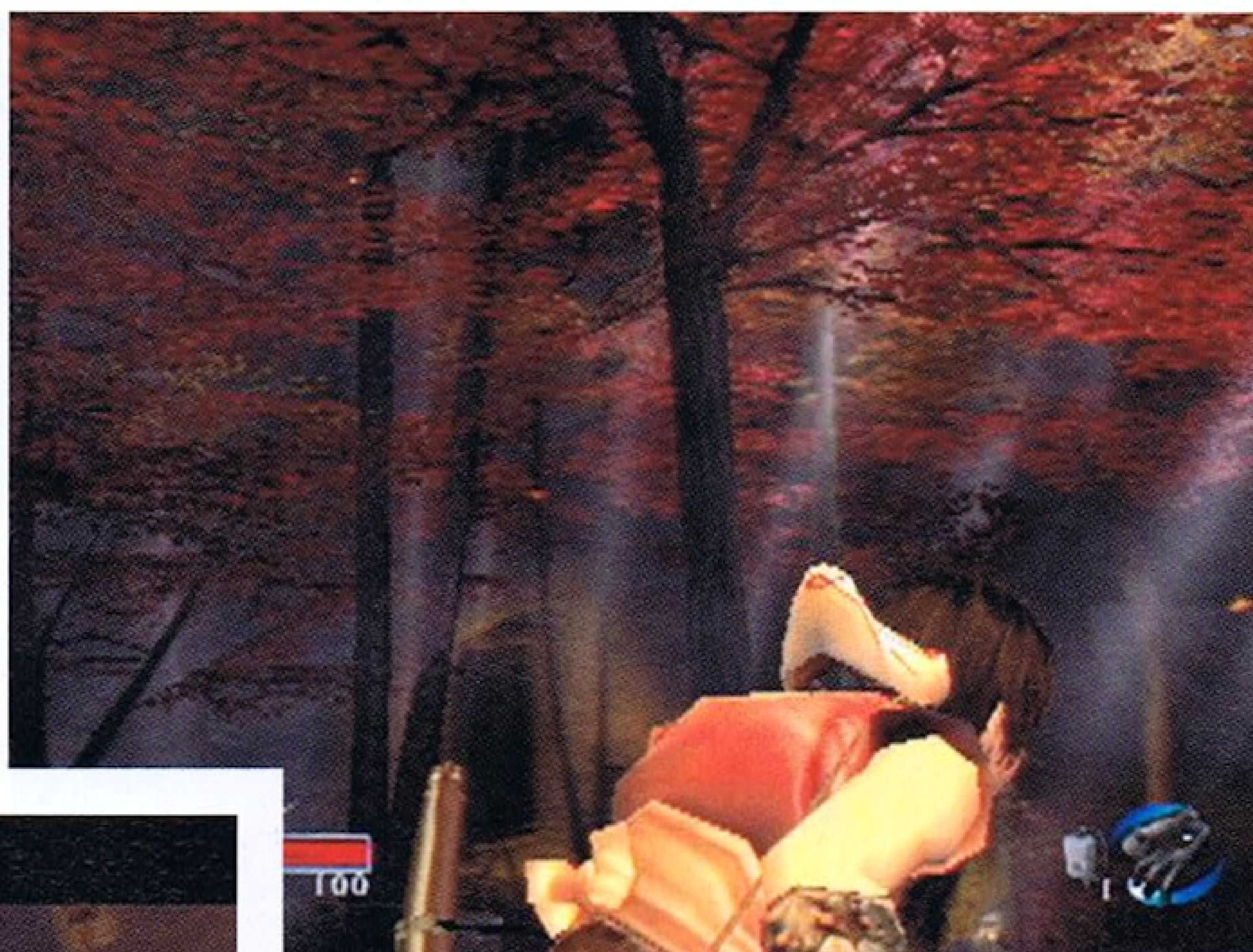
SOS

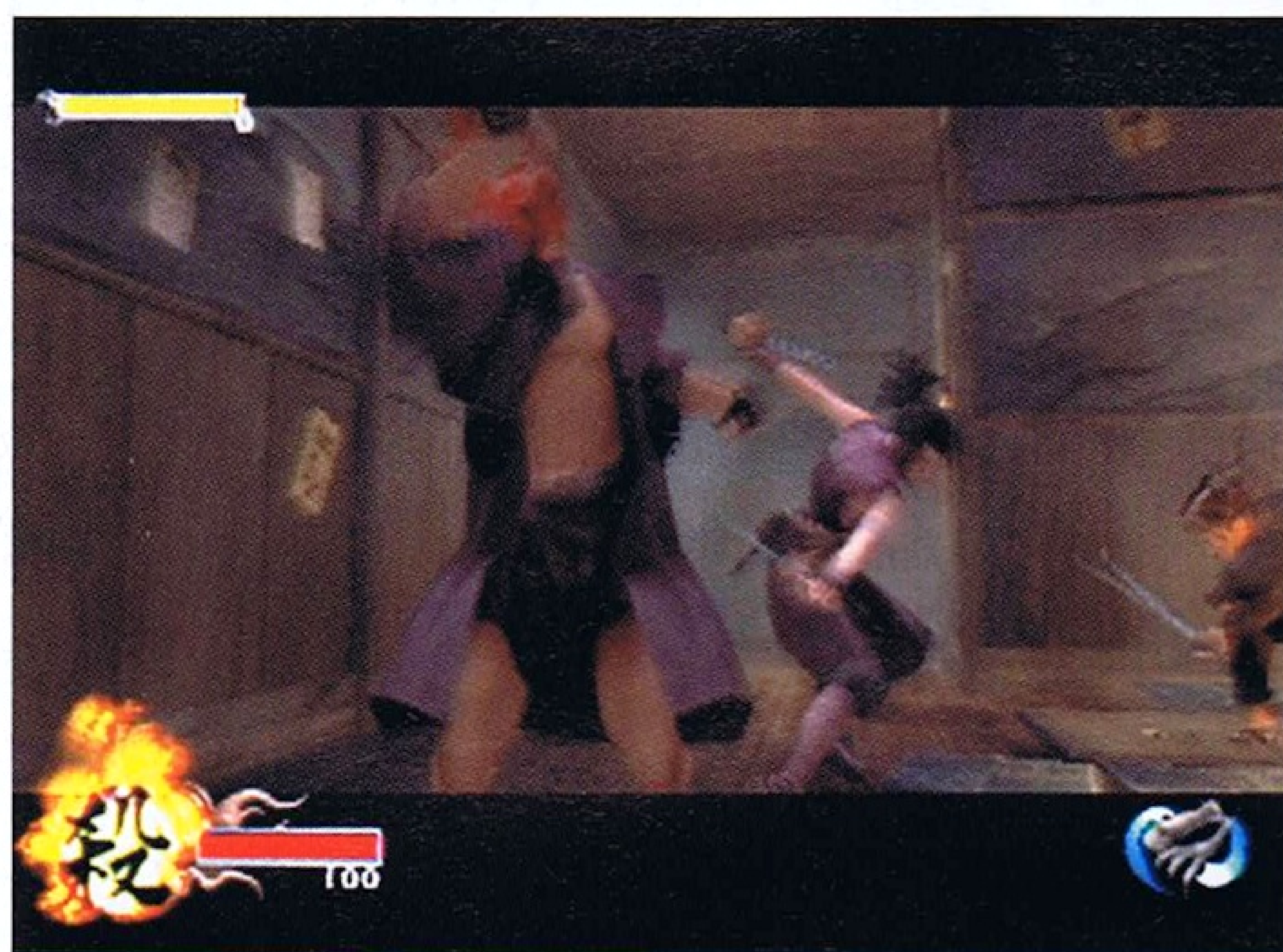
Like the previous games, you're given two save points to use whenever you wish. Often, though, thanks to the chaotic nature of the campaign, the apparent end of the level is anything but, as new objectives get added in a last-minute blitz. It's quite possible to get unwittingly marooned halfway through a mission, where restarting it with these hidden objectives in mind seems far more bearable than having to run a punishing and unintentional gauntlet to get to the end of the stage.

Tenchu Kurenai

Format: **PlayStation2** Publisher: **From Software** Developer: **K2/From Software** Price: **¥6,800 ($86)** Release: **Out now (Japan), TBC (Australia)**









K2's SNK heritage is clear in the style and concept of boss fights (top) but there's neither the time nor a clear enough view for anything but dodges and button-mashing



The killing game

As in *WOH*, extra abilities are unlocked through stealth kills, but *Kurenai* adjusts the formula by awarding a number of scrolls depending on the severity of the assassination. An indicator briefly flares up at the perfect moment, and launching a stealth kill in time earns the maximum possible scrolls, in addition to adding a grisly moment-of-impact highlight to the already savage sequences.









Some of the original *Tenchu*'s level layouts are revisited, and they bolster an already strong level design. Oversaturated colours abound, an obvious improvement over the largely washed-out *WOH*

Tenchu has always been a singular vision in search of a game to do it justice. Neither its original nor current developer have ever quite pulled off its skewed, uniquely affecting Kabuki show without a hitch, but then the contrast of brooding stealth and furious duels, careful forethought and twitch reaction, sober period piece and wild flight of fancy was never going to be easy to stage.

These all feature in *Kurenai* (often to more vivid effect than ever before), but also reprised is *Wrath Of Heaven*'s engine, with all the problems that entails. Most prominent are a camera almost wilfully determined to break the game and crippling slowdown as alerted enemies' AI routines clash with the processor-gobbling graphic density of outdoor levels.

That AI remains near-negligible, although it's compensated for with considerably more interesting enemy placement and sheer weight of numbers – many guards patrol in pairs, at once a warning and a murderous invitation to attempt the new double stealth kill. As for the levels, they're generally smaller, more intimate affairs than in *WOH* and, while their Lego-block construction is still obvious, an overwhelming profusion of detail – wreaths of mist coalescing in arctic moonbeams, leaves scattering through hazy lamplight – are an object lesson in detached beauty.

Beauty, but not functionality. Each beam of light or crawling shadow is hand-drawn, as insubstantial as the traces of desperate red your blades describe through the air, and make little contribution to gameplay. A stealth game where light and darkness are largely irrelevant may seem obsolete in Sam Fisher's long, perfectly modelled shadow – but *Tenchu* was never a game about skulking in corners.

Rather, *Kurenai* is at its richest when you're moving with relentless determination from ground to sky and back again, leaving a swathe cut through the enemy ranks almost as an aside. Few games can capture the sense of being in the hunt so well, and by degrees few games can disappoint so much when this sense is lost to wrangling with the camera or gawkish, unpredictable controls shackling your weightlessness.

In terms of atmosphere and intent, this is the best *Tenchu* yet, but it's still painfully lacking. It's apparent K2 understands and cares deeply for the experience *Tenchu* can provide, but the next instalment must deliver it in a fashion that convinces a wider audience to do the same.



Edge rating: Six out of ten

Headhunter: Redemption

Format: **PS2 (version tested), Xbox** Publisher: **Sega** Developer: **Amuze** Price: **$89.95** Release: **Out now**

It's a shame, really. If *Headhunter*'s controls were as coherent as its looks, it could've made for one of the greatest action adventure games of recent times. Instead, we're left with a clunky shooting gallery that is, in parts, a likeable gunfighting game.

But first, those visuals. Bleached and ghostly, like everything has been coated in some kind of radioactive Vaseline, *Headhunter*'s future world doesn't just ripple with a haunting glow, but manages to hang together well as a style, with a continuous sense of location. This adds to the ambience – reinforced by an excellent score – of a crafted atmosphere, but it's swiftly deflated by your first accident-prone shootout.

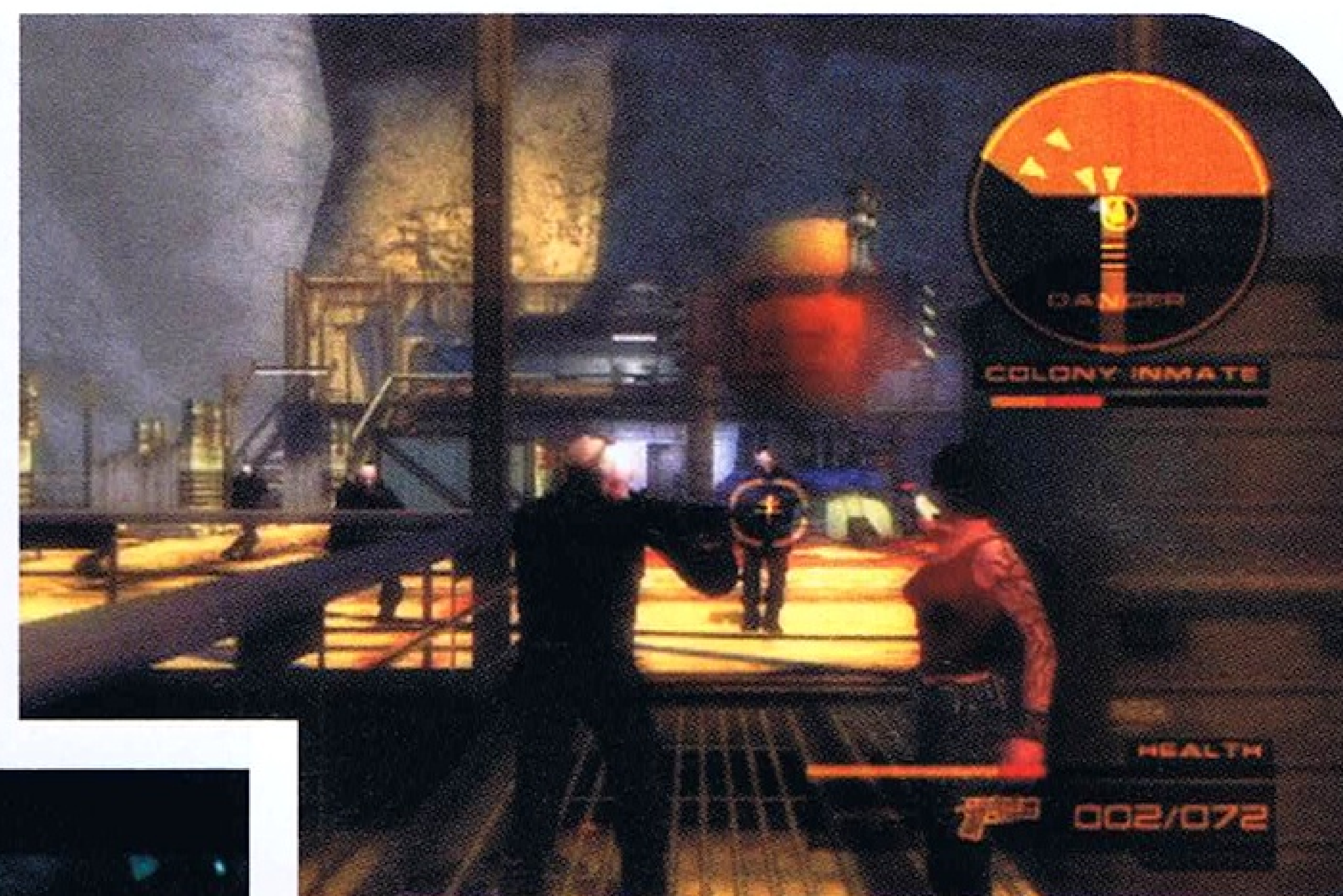
Gunplay is at its best when you confront enemies in a tight corridor. Locking on is performed by a reticule that hovers around a target before zeroing in – the stiller you are, the faster the zoom. Similarly, keeping yourself moving will throw your opponent's aim off to make you a tricky target. When you're involved in combat while leaning around a corner, this makes the game feel like a tidy *Time Crisis* homage, one where you feel tangibly in control of the situation. Shame it's tarnished by the fact that the enemy still seems to be able to hit you despite your body being out of view. Not even waist-high boxes can be used to create any effective cover.

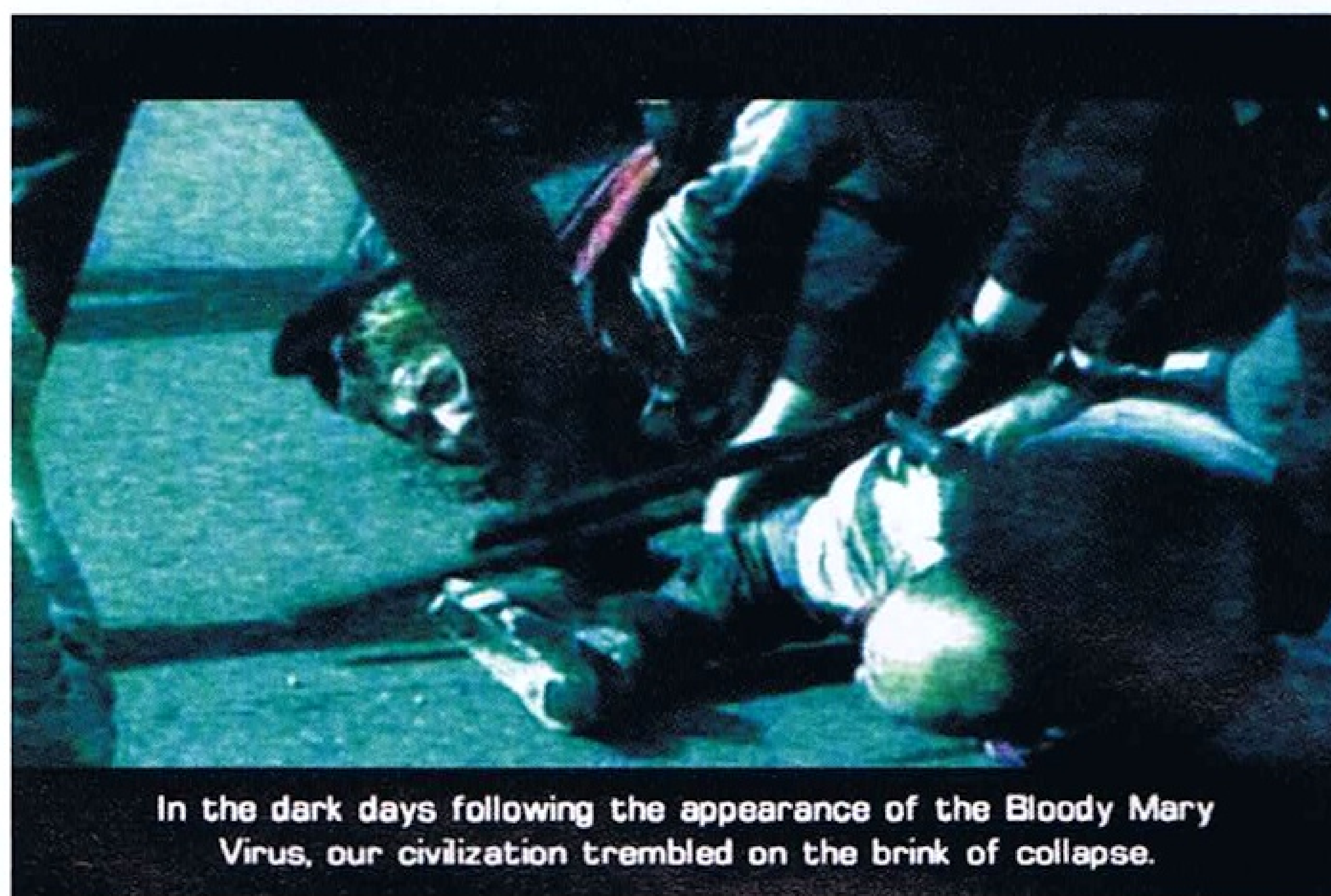
Outside of bearable wall stealthing, however, *Headhunter*'s control scheme is a giddy mess, with indecisive functions that can't differentiate between you wanting to pick up something or climb on to a box, and a lock-on so swerving that it can't decide between a nearby enemy and one in the middle distance with any amount of useful speed. Shootouts in open areas become farcical, as your character spins and twitches to face an opponent you'd inadvertently turned towards due to the combination of oversensitive handling and, once you attempt to lock on, an inflexible camera. At times, your character's aim seems preoccupied with the scenery rather than the dangerous man with the gun several feet away.

While the game is paced well, its puzzles don't serve it any. Mostly, they involve scanning the scenery for a lock or a bolt to shoot off. Perversely, you're not allowed to shoot scenery until you've managed to scan it. All this helps turn what could have been a flowing and well-realised adventure into a fractured, patchwork garble.

Edge rating: Five out of ten

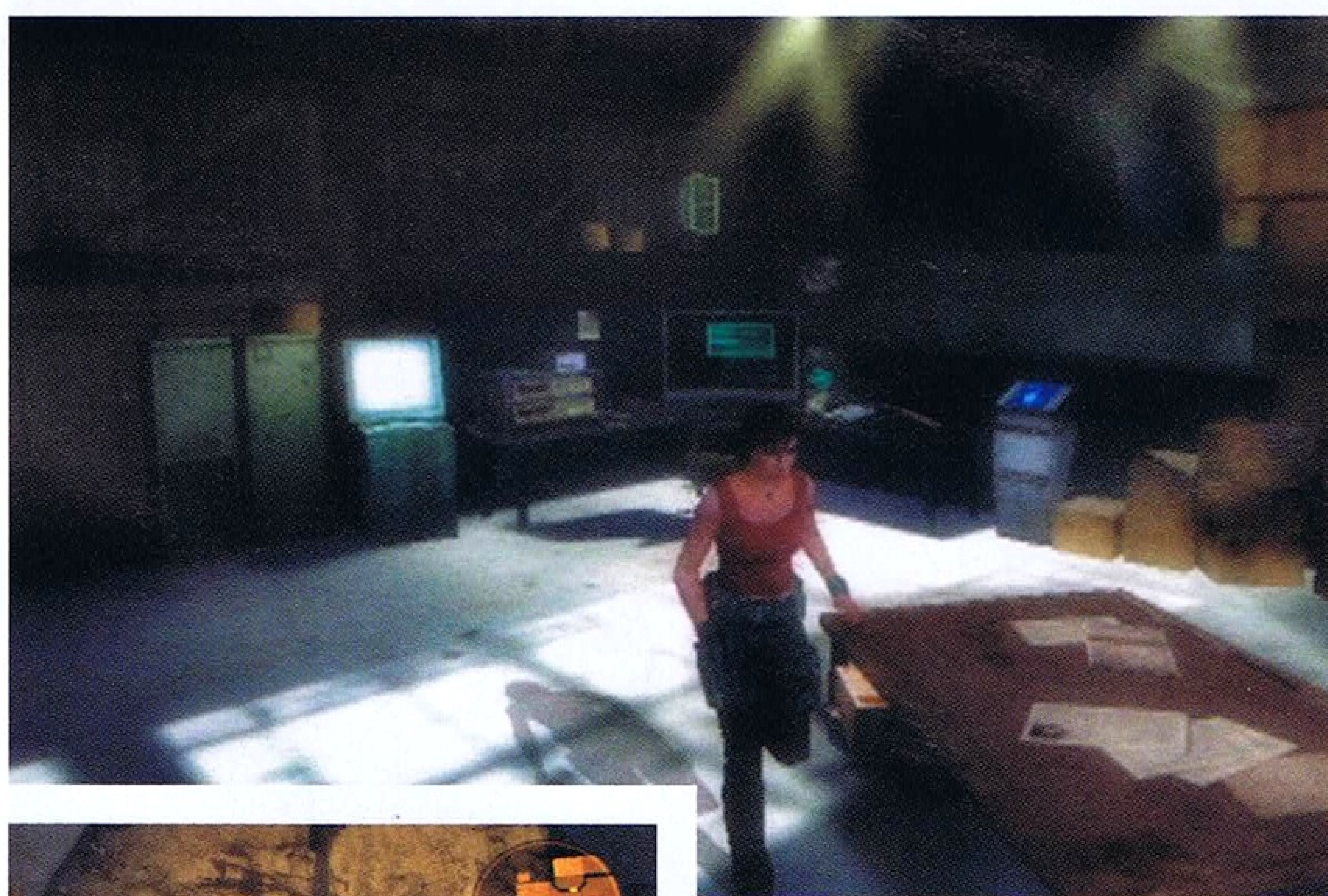








Most boss encounters can be solved by using an adrenaline booster – effectively giving you temporary invincibility – and then charging at them with a whole clip of machine gun fire





Lining up with a ladder is often far trickier than it ever should be, as lead character Leeza – backed up with communication from mentor and *Headhunter* star Jack Wade – handles so loosely



The Below Job

As a testament to the strength of *Headhunter*'s plot, the game features a 'Citizen's Media Bank', which contains the typical unlockable galleries of artwork. However, it also includes a number of colourful, satirical commercials created to enforce the sensation of corporate domination within the 'Above' – the section of society that exists above ground – including a porn-styled ad for recruitment work in the underworld – The 'Below' Job.

Pikmin 2

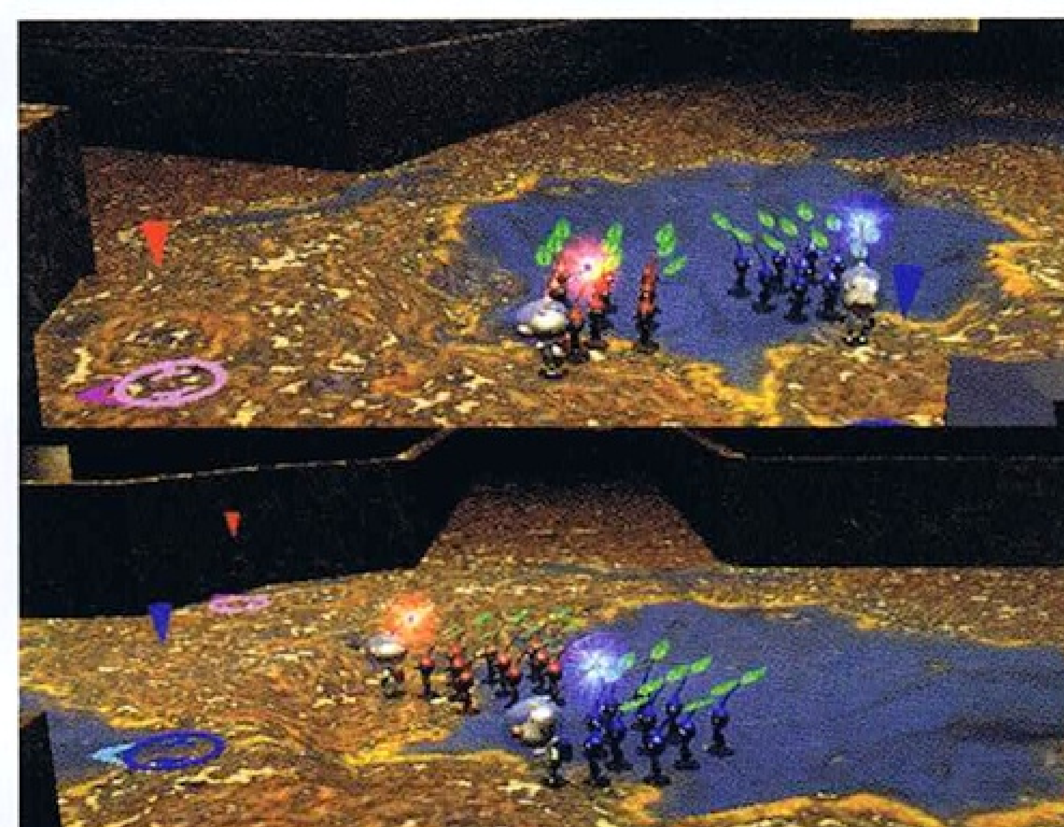
Format: **GameCube** Publisher: **Nintendo** Developer: **EAD** Price: **$99.95** Release: **Out now**







As with the first game, the sentient plants rely heavily on blooming from bud to full flower to evolve and become more capable on the whole





Multipikmin

Pikmin 2 features an excellent CTF inspired two player challenge where you attempt to capture your opponents four marbles, the player who does this first wins, however, a wildcard marble is also available in the level that lets you win instantly. The fervent nature of this system makes for heated battles and is easily one of the most fetching aspects of this revamped sequel.



This element of play was actually a stand alone game revealed at E3 this year called *Stage Debut*. You could map your face onto any one of the characters and have them dance or do your bidding

Still not content with creating accessible media for the mainstream consumer, Nintendo has continued to push the uniqueness of its quirkier titles in an attempt to put a tangible strangle-hold on an uninspired games industry that is subscribing to a formula that equates to survival. Whether *Pikmin 2* manages to put a little extra squeeze into said strangle-hold is debatable, however, what is certain is that *Pikmin 2*, in its own right, is an engaging and brilliantly fun title, despite its truly eldritch presentation.

As suggested, *Pikmin 2* is a Nintendo game, through and through – from the tongue-in-cheek intro video, to the self-referencing collectibles found within, *Pikmin 2* caters to the Nintendo loyalist without shame; it's like a slower paced *Super Smash Bros. Melee* – the Nintendo game that keeps on giving.

There are a number of updates and changes to the gameplay formula established in the original outing, the most welcome of all being the removal of a time-limit. Now, you'll be able to explore your surroundings without fear of losing that precious day – the object of *Pikmin 2* is to uncover whatever goodies you can (you're no longer searching for ship parts, now any old junk will do) while utilising your various *Pikmin* abilities to completely open up each level. *Pikmin* abilities is another facet of gameplay revamped with the introduction of new types of Pikmin ranging from poisonous albino *Pikmin* to heavy grape-like purple *Pikmin*. These new *Pikmin* open up the game's scope for puzzle depth ten-fold. There are also two characters to control now, further adding to the options open to the player as both characters can be controlled in real-time making for more care on your part in task, item and puzzle maintenance.

The addition of these elements is genuinely refreshing. *Pikmin 2* is the game *Pikmin* should have been. There is simply no pressure to complete tasks, and leading your hordes withour a pressing agenda is actually far more enjoyable than it was with direction and a deadline. There is also a greater sense of danger in *Pikmin 2* with an emphasis on the 'other inevitability' – *Pikmin* die, this is a fact of life, but they'll fight to the bitter end, and those of you too soft to accept this should look away.

While lacking the sort of elements required to win over a broad audience, *Pikmin 2* manages to satiate those in dire need of some traditional Nintendo innovation.

Edge rating: Eight out of ten

Juiced

Format: **PC, PS2, Xbox (version tested)** Publisher: **TBC** Developer: **Juice Games** Price: **$99.95** Release: **TBC**



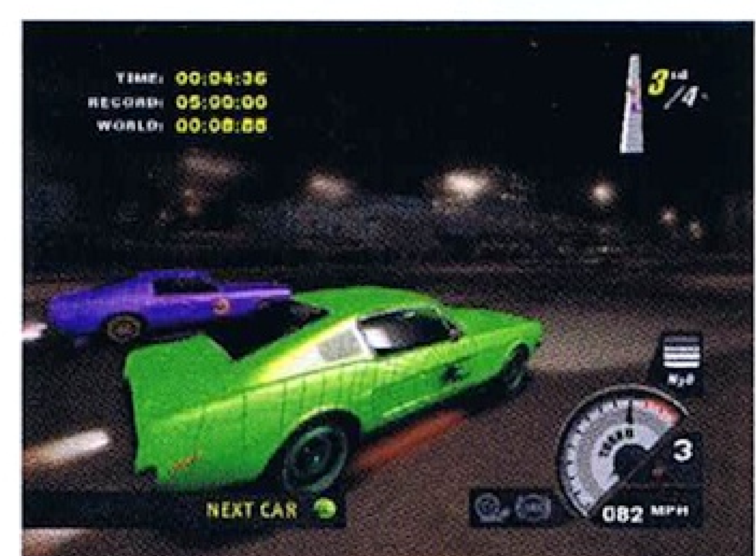


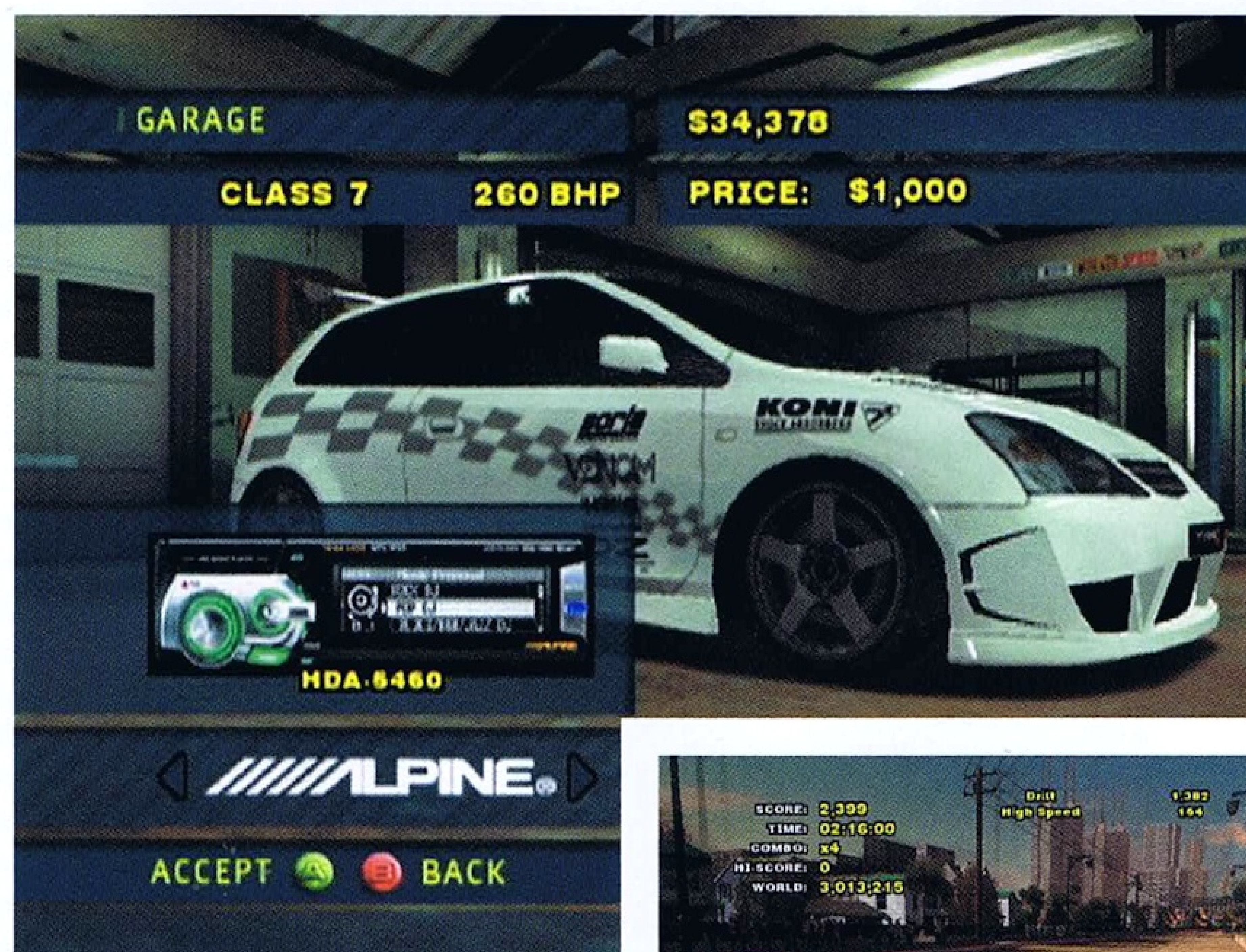






Showoff rounds allow you to perform for the delight of the crowd. Online multiplayer (not tested) is promised for the retail version





Much thought has clearly gone into *Juiced*, but there is a notable lack of general polish all round, and the menu progression is unnecessarily convoluted and confusing



A sense of belonging

The game's strongest point, other than successfully delivering a comprehensive and engaging tuning shop, is the sense of community it attempts to instill. Rival racers aren't simply faceless competitors, and the ability to build your own crew (there are team events in which to participate) are fresh additions. True, the racing itself is quite soulless, but perhaps it'd be argued that that's not necessarily the game's focus.

They say lightning doesn't strike twice, but employees of Juice Games may disagree. Having seen its promising *Lamborghini* project dissipate into vapourware following Rage's demise in 2002 (hence the birth of Juice Games) the team has just witnessed history repeat itself as *Juiced* publisher Acclaim finally succumbed to an epic battle with debt. An independent finance deal ensures the rights to the game don't belong to Acclaim, meaning the studio 'just' needs another publisher.

This could be harder than expected, as *Juiced* has issues. The game showed great potential throughout development, and to be fair much of it has been realised. Skip past the atrocious intro and, if in Career mode, you're soon buying a ride and customising it to your wallet's content. The number of options are as intricate and detailed as expected, although a few of the stock figures for some models are dubious – odd considering the game's core demographic will surely be able to pluck these vehicles' top speeds and BHP figures from brains nourished by McDonald's and Max Power. Nevertheless, the depth and breadth of the customisation is impressive, and the vehicle list includes the necessary suspects.

Once you've sorted out your ICE and ECU (and run a dynamometer test to confirm power figures, of course) you're ready to hit the tarmac. The game is calendar-structured, with different types of events (sprint, circuit, point-to-point, showoff) occurring on different days, spread across an LA-style metropolis. Your car, respect (gained from impressing rival crew heads) and cash reserves determine access to these meetings, although you can still attend and bet on participants when you've no option but to watch. Another great touch is the notion of making the player take financial responsibility for damage incurred during events – it heightens realism and injects meetings with the sense of modding culture the game tries hard to encapsulate.

A convincing virtual community and novel touches can't outrun *Juiced*'s major problem. Handling is initially odious, switching between under- and oversteer in a horribly vicious – and unrealistic – fashion, a problem the AI drivers don't seem to have. It improves once past the hot hatches, with the dynamic better suited to a longer wheelbase and rear- or all-wheel drive, but the feeling of unpredictability means you never feel fully engaged. It's enough to significantly twist *Juiced*'s conceptually ambitious chassis.

Edge rating: Five out of ten

Obscure

Format: **PC, PS2 (version tested), Xbox** Publisher: **Ubisoft** Developer: **Hydravision** Price: **$79.95 (PC $69.95)** Release: **Out now**







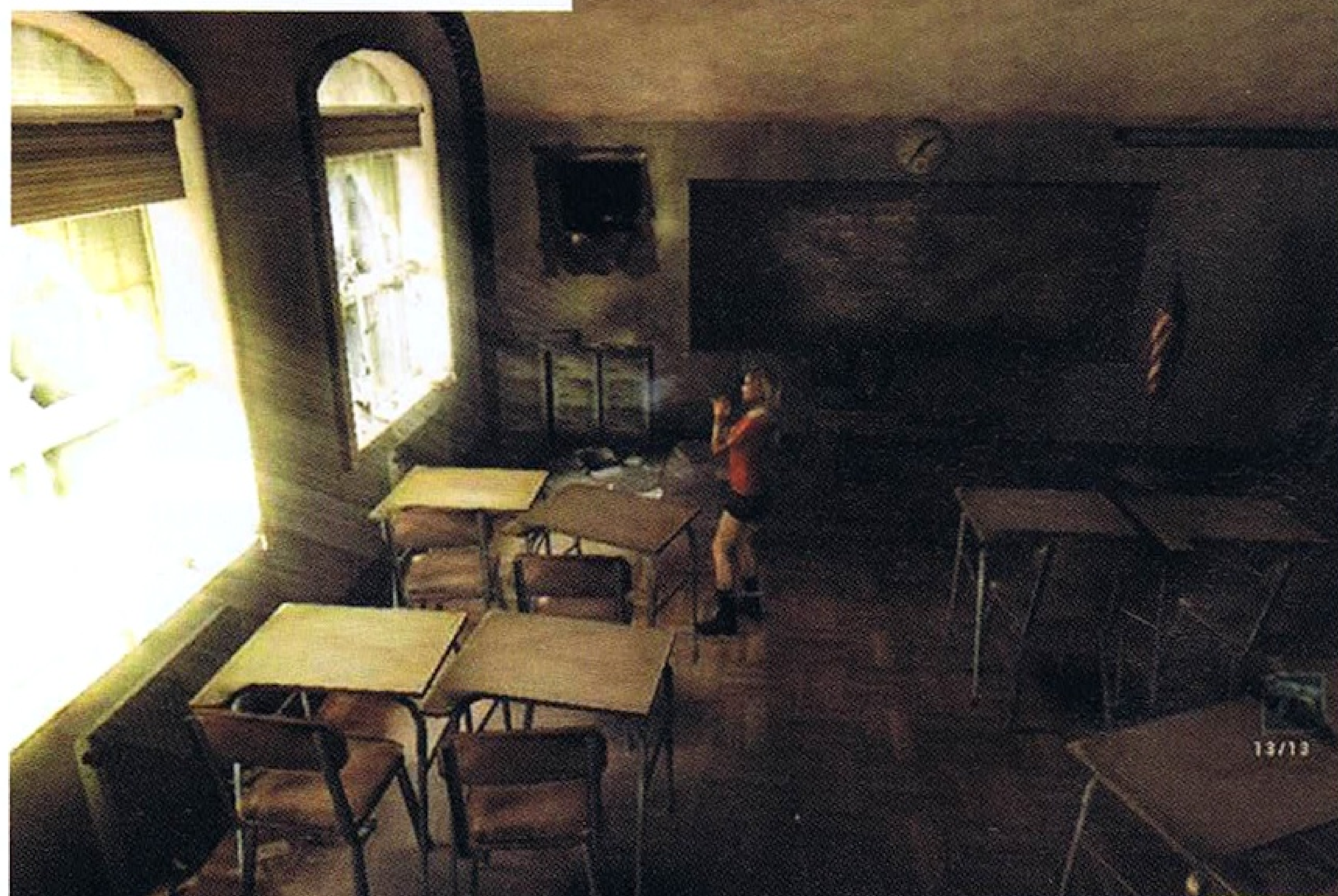


The high school setting doesn't do anything to change some of the survival-horrorisms, including ready access to shotguns.



New Skool

Taking inspiration from the teen horror flick phenomenon and featuring a rousing intro fuelled by the music of Sum 41, there's certainly initial promise of fresh meat on the survival horror template's bones. It's just a shame subsequent ideas, were implemented as such timid steps away from the norm. Better harnessed may have helped steer events en masse from plunging to such a low



While far from ugly, *Obscure* isn't about to set the world afire with its faithful adherance to the survival horror look. Nor for that matter, will its similarities to an old episode of *Buffy*.

It seems an unfortunate irony that the plot of so many survival horror outings typically revolves around some form of genetic experimentation gone horribly wrong. While the recipe for success in a genre of steadily stagnating conventions may indeed involve an ambitious hybrid creation that melds, say, the gripping psychological tension of *Project Zero* with the adrenaline-soaked action found more towards the *Resident Evil* end of the spectrum, rookie developer Hydravision has instead managed to conceive a bizarre cocktail of each camp's inherent shortcomings.

On the one hand the experience bears all the 'shoot first, ask questions about the flimsy plot later' hallmarks of a shallow trigger-happy affair, yet replaces the associated solid combat mechanics with those found as more of a secondary element in such chillers as the early *Silent Hill* titles. Conversely, while influence of *Silent Hill's* slower-paced cinematic formula is just as evident in *Obscure's* underpinning, the all important atmosphere you'd hope to find dripping from every pixel is nowhere to be found and a lack of gruesome panache in the creature design department renders the scare factor of your foes closer to that of the *Monsters Inc.* cast than the stuff of nightmares.

Without any atmospheric substance drawing players deep into its clutches and a distinct mediocrity to the combat system offering little tangible reward, incentive to persevere is all but crippled. It's a cruel bottom line for the project to suffer when the production value is commendably high and there was clear endeavour to bolt some refreshing ideas onto the familiar genre framework. For instance, players are furnished with an interchangeable group of five teenage characters, each possessing a valuable special skill in the gang's quest to resolve the macabre experiment-related catastrophe that has beset their school. Although the introduction of a team dynamic does undermine some of the vulnerability factor, combining Josh's intuit for the whereabouts of clues with Shannon's intellectual insight can allow an action-oriented player to eliminate much of the classroom combing and puzzle pondering from play.

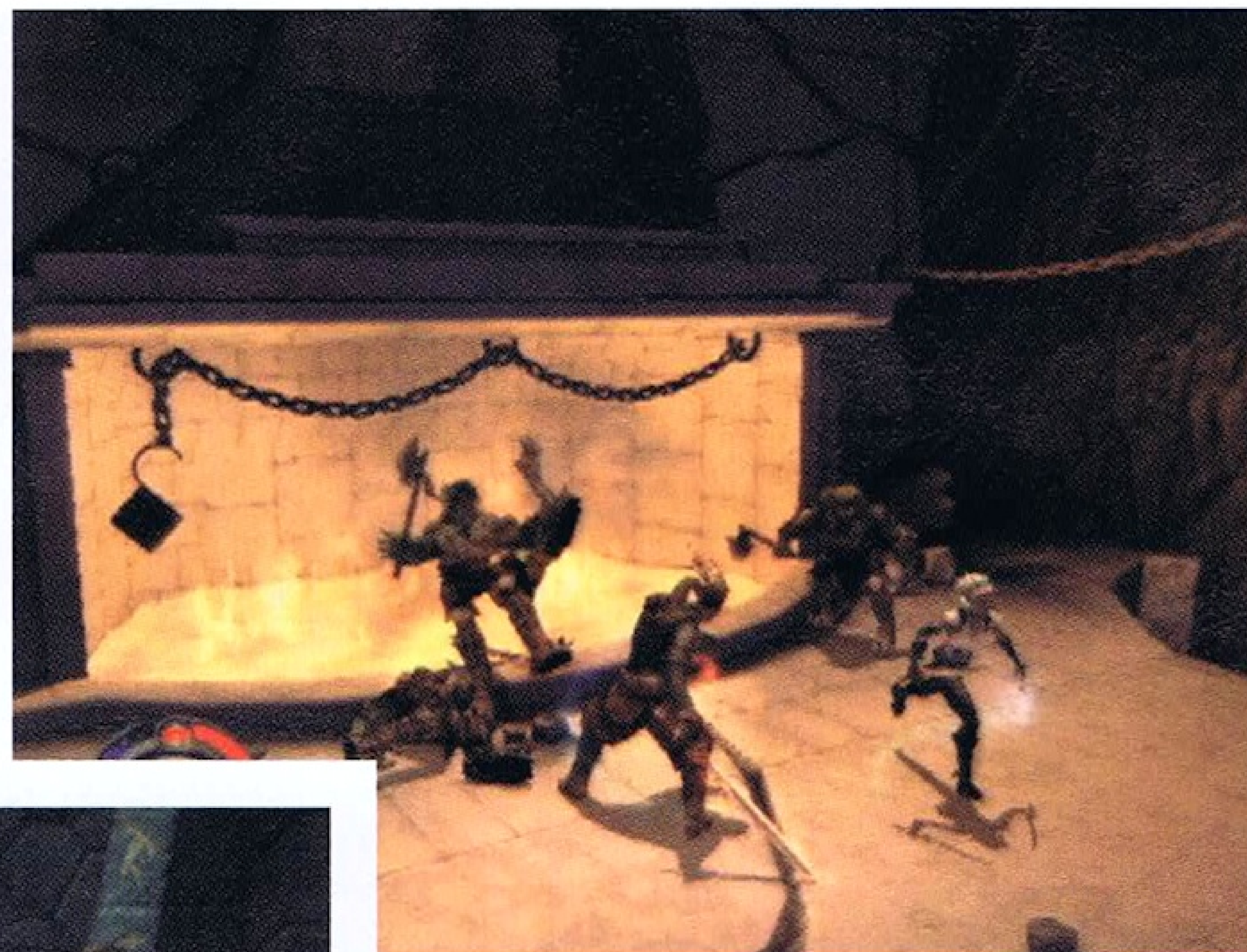
Yet despite the odd glimmer of imagination, such facets add little to what is otherwise a completely bland mix of the genre's least enticing ingredients.

Edge rating: Four out of ten

Forgotten Realms: Demon Stone

Format: PS2 (version tested), Xbox Publisher: Stormfront Developer: Atari Price: $99.95 Release: Out now







As was the case with *The Two Towers*, there's a disappointing lack of weight behind swings: only finishing strikes really seem to connect





Old lavender eyes

With *Demon Stone*'s storyline penned by fantasy author R A Salvatore, it's inevitable that his most famous character, Drizzt Do'Urden, makes a scene-stealing playable appearance in the game's most enjoyable level. At one point, Do'Urden cements his reputation as the Realms' hardest elf by singlehandedly breaking a troll siege without upsetting his perfectly coiffured hair.



A blue glow indicates shadows, in which the rogue can trigger her limited invisibility and perform instant kills. It renders her the most useful party member, at least in the glaring absence of a cleric

Forgotten Realms aficionados – there's no need to be bashful, you're among friends – have been well served with games during the setting's near 20-year history. The latest is an interesting proposition: though *Demon Stone* leans heavily on the sword-arm of Stormfront's biggest success, *The Two Towers*, the developer's experience with Realms dates back to the *Savage Frontier* series and the original *Neverwinter Nights*.

Those hoping for a defter touch behind the three-hit-combo brawls and aggressively cinematic presentation will find it, to some degree, in the game's adventuring party. The trio prove for the most part sympathetic characters, and the approximation of companionship provided by the group AI is involving. Regularly cycling direct control, a necessity to power the team's area-clearing super attack, is made second nature by the supporting characters' believable dedication to using their skills sensibly, working in concert to pitch foes off ledges and making ungainly scrambles for healing potions.

The party dynamic wavers, however, in battles where only one character's abilities can allow the others to progress (invariably the mage's ranged attack). Your companions can be relied on for vocal encouragement, but not to defend you from enemies; similarly, leaving obstacle-clearing duties to the AI finds it easily distracted by the endlessly respawning horde. This liability can see the boss fights – which are often poorly paced, mistaking relentlessness for drama – slog on long past the point where a sympathetic dungeon master would fudge the dice rolls.

And blinkered AI is the lesser of two disappointments, considering you're seldom required to use the party for anything other than gang button-mashing: difficulty comes not from increasing reliance on teamwork, but from ever-larger waves of enemies, trampling cooperative strategy. For an action title it's enjoyable enough, but its AD&D leanings are akin to after-school sessions fighting through every creature in the Monster Manual.

Demon Stone suggests more potential than it fulfils, but it's a not-entirely-failed experiment in teaching old dice new tricks, and a follow-up with the same attention to detail but more ambitious design would be welcome. Ultimately, the most memorable aspect isn't technical achievement, but the heroes themselves – and that much is perfectly faithful to the source material.

Edge rating: Six out of ten

Rocky Legends

Format: PS2, Xbox (version tested) Publisher: Ubisoft Developer: Venom Games Price: $79.95 Release: October

This is, in effect, what happens when game sequels and movie sequels collide. Characters are fleshed out by more elaborate career modes, and the bad guys become the good guys by becoming playable.

The *Legends* tag refers to a career mode that's no longer dedicated solely to Balboa's rags-to-riches ascent, but encompasses the struggles of all the most notorious Rocky ring men: Drago, Creed and Lang, each with their own trajectories, regimes and humble beginnings. The frippery of this revisiting of Rocky's greatest hits isn't impressive, though, as cut-scenes are poor and the voice acting is unconvincing to the point of hammy comedy.

The heart of the game is largely unchanged. The camera has panned slightly back from the boxers, meaning that fights lose a little of that carrot-snap brutality that made the original feel like such a brassy wallop of a gloves-off beat 'em up rather than a boxing game. Straight body blows seem to have been shortened and weakened, but hooks to the gut are still as stinging and problematic as ever. Super punches can, after the successful landing of several clean hits, be tripled into a ferocious and deadly combo. Also, players on the receiving end of a pummelling can push their opponent away, at the cost of stamina. None of this feels like refinement, however, just a slight bulking up.

This is still a consuming, flowing and sparky fighting game that, like Rocky himself, is as defiant as it is aged. With *Legends*, you're buying into an upgraded suite of presentation – of lengthy career modes, of yet more movie-faithful music – than anything else. It's a bulging DVD special edition next to the VHS functionality of the original, but, annoyingly, it's a DVD that forces you to unlock all of its special features.

This is the game's greatest shame – that it insists on that hollow value of keeping all the multiplayer goodies (stages and boxers) locked away until the player has jumped through enough hoops in the career mode to purchase them, punishing those who want to indulge in the still-excellent two player fisticuffs for not having played solo. It smacks of trying to draw out the dying moments of a well-flogged horse. With *Knockout Kings*' recent implementation of a gutsy and cathartic analogue control scheme, this is perhaps the last time Rocky should strut his stuff before a timely retirement. But then that's probably what they said about Rocky II.

Edge rating: Six out of ten











Authenticity of licence is part of *Rocky Legends*' appeal, but the outrageously bad voice acting attached to some of the more infamous characters doesn't help matters any





More classic Rocky tunes feature in *Legends*; there's even an excellently timed fade-in of Gonna Fly Now as your opponent comes close to defeat. The need to unlock bonus content remains a problem



Lord of the wings

Bag yourself over $150,000 in the career mode and you can unlock the Chicken Chase training, a bonus stage that sees Stallone grasping at greasy fowl while trainer Mickey rasps advice from the sidelines. It's one of the best unlockables in the game, albeit one that doesn't offer much depth. Save-hen out of ten?

Rome: Total War

Format: PC | Publisher: Activision | Developer: Creative Assembly | Price: $79.95 | Release: Out now

Since *Medieval: Total War* already married turn-based campaign play with real-time 3D battles, at a glance, *Rome* appears to simply be a more comely follow up to its predecessor. Creative Assembly have done far more than give the *Total War* series a facelift, by playing on the traits and working of the Roman Empire, Creative Assembly have worked Imperial ideals into gameplay goals. The result is a game that is finally as deep as it is attractive.

The main campaign sees the player assume the role of one of three Roman noble houses in the Empire's infancy. The ultimate goal is to become Imperator, seizing control of the whole Empire. Naturally, the Senate will not take kindly to being usurped by one of its servants, and no noble house can lead Rome without the support of the people.

The masses love the bottom line, favouring Roman conquerors rather than errand runners, but the Senate likes its agents to accomplish specific tasks rather than embark on chaotic continental slaughter.

Unless indulging in historical or custom battles, *Rome* is not a quick fix game at all. Be prepared to spend at least a week trying to carve out an Empire with numerous generations of your chosen faction. There's everything to deal with from how to keep a town with strong ties to a dead culture happy, whether or not that captain courting the family heir's daughter is good enough breeding stock, right through to balancing the books and diplomacy.

Aside from looking infinitely better than *Medieval's* 'Risk' campaign interface, the move to a 3D map is quite significant. Units now travel distances rather than provinces, so positioning is as vital as it should be. In fact, all 3D battle terrains are created based upon the landscape from the campaign map.

Aesthetic improvements are welcome, and as plentiful as they are, there's still the odd reality dysfunction. Watching any given unit engage another will still reveal AI hiccups and oddities as individuals act as part of a collective in a questionable manner. *Rome's* beauty is in cinematic scope, not minute detail.

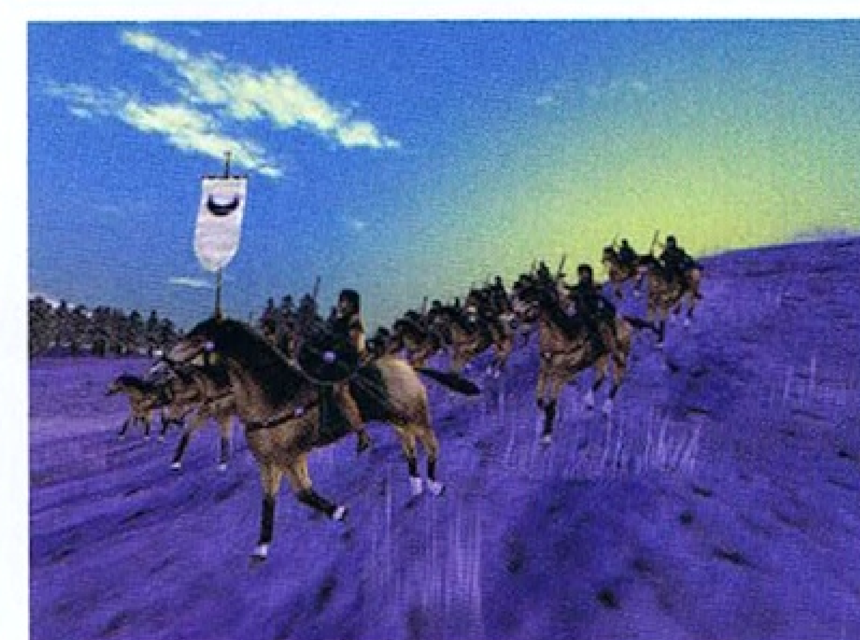
While there are enough similarities between *Rome* and *Medieval* to prevent the former from bearing a truly unique feel, what Creative Assembly have achieved here is no mean feat. They've used a period setting to make the two halves of one gaming whole work in synergy like never before. Geared for both purists and those who require visceral action.

Edge rating: Eight out of ten









Hills are what a smart general will head for in field warfare. An enemy that has to climb it to reach you will be nicely softened up...





Cavalry were not the dominant units on the field in ancient times, but they are far and away the best at tearing through large numbers of unprepared enemies - causing whole units to rout, making them easy to chase down and finish



Almost complete...

If *Rome: Total War* has one shortcoming (or at frontier to conquer), it's the naval battles which are simply resolved in an auto-battle system that takes stock of numbers, unit types, leader attributes and spits out a result. While common sense can be applied with naval command, in a game that champions the ideal of a smart commander being able to take down a much larger force by cleverly utilising their forces' strengths, as well as any tactical advantages that can be derived from the surroundings.

Naval battles alone make an excellent argument for an expansion pack.

*Kill

The making of…

MUD

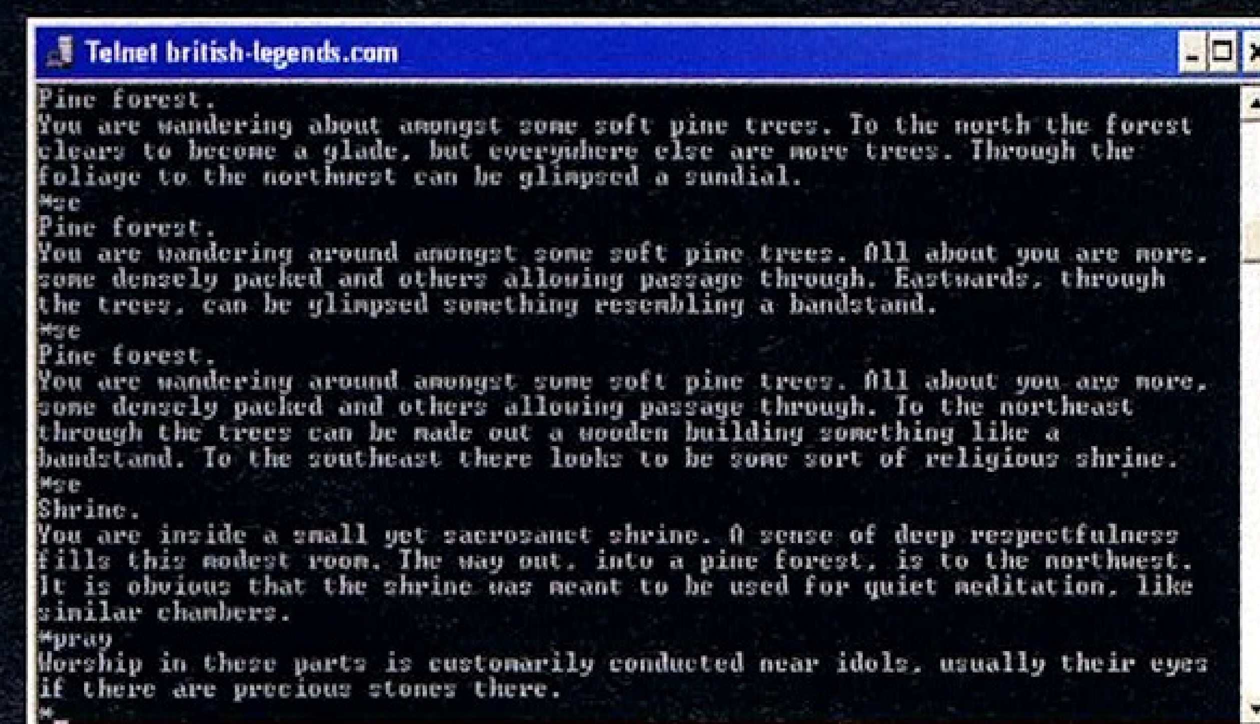
The opportunity to create an entirely new style of entertainment is granted to a hallowed few, but with the creation of MUD the concept of massively multiplayer online gaming was born

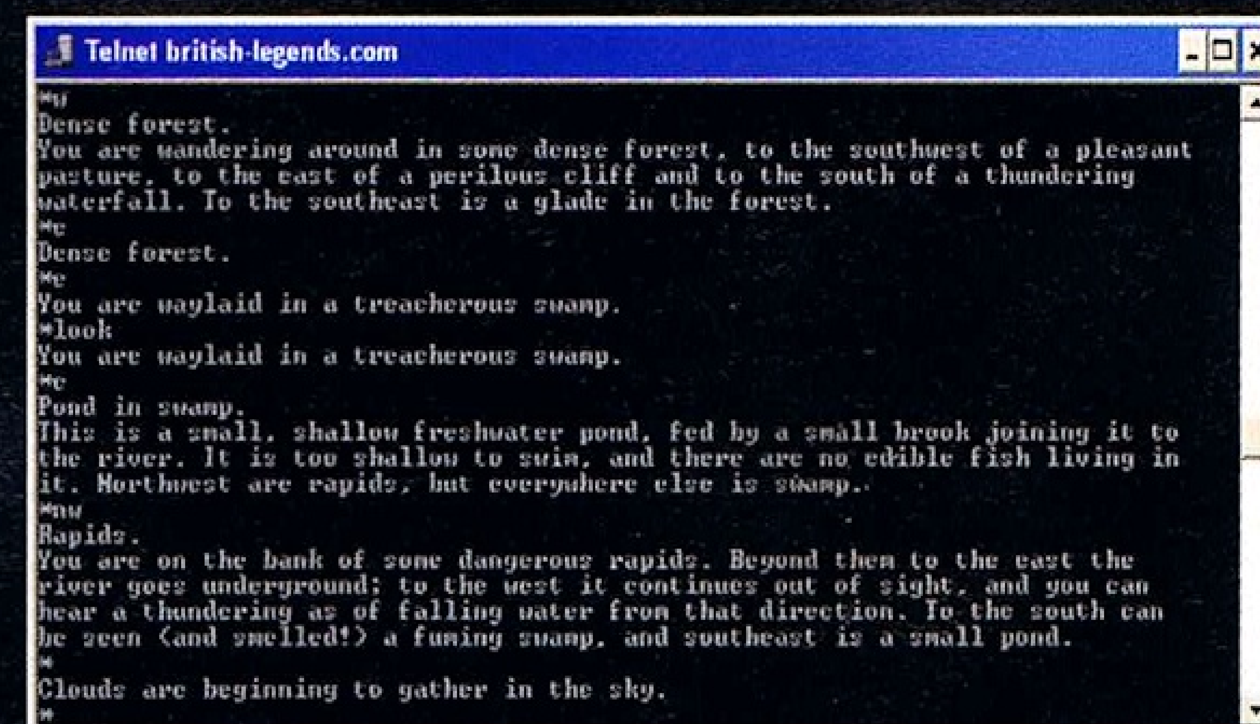
It was four scant years after *Pong* first made it into homes across the world, and decades brfore the advent of the world wide web, that the first massively multiplayer online roleplaying game made its debut. And yet, despite the rudimentary equipment upon which it relied, its greatest problems were not technical in nature. Suicides, unverified wills, conscientious objectors and sex-change operations all figure large in the 26-year history of *Multi-User Dungeon* – a history that has seen it create an entire industry and name a genre yet stay relatively anonymous to the wider gaming world.

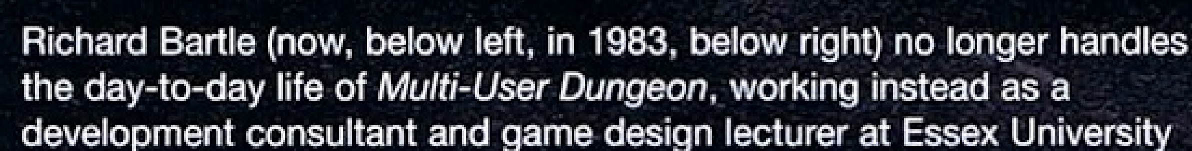
Unlike many classic titles, there is no difficulty to be had in experiencing *MUD* as it was originally conceived and enjoyed. Enter the address telnet://british-legends.com:27750/ into your web browser and you can play the original version of *MUD1*, just as it was seen and used in 1983 (or try telnet://mudii.co.uk/ for *MUD2*).

Although even now the description is rarely attributed to it *MUD* is, to all intents and purposes, an MMORPG. Entering the game, you are thrown into a principally benign fantasy world in which you can choose to gain experience by fighting monsters, explore peaceably or simply interact with other users.

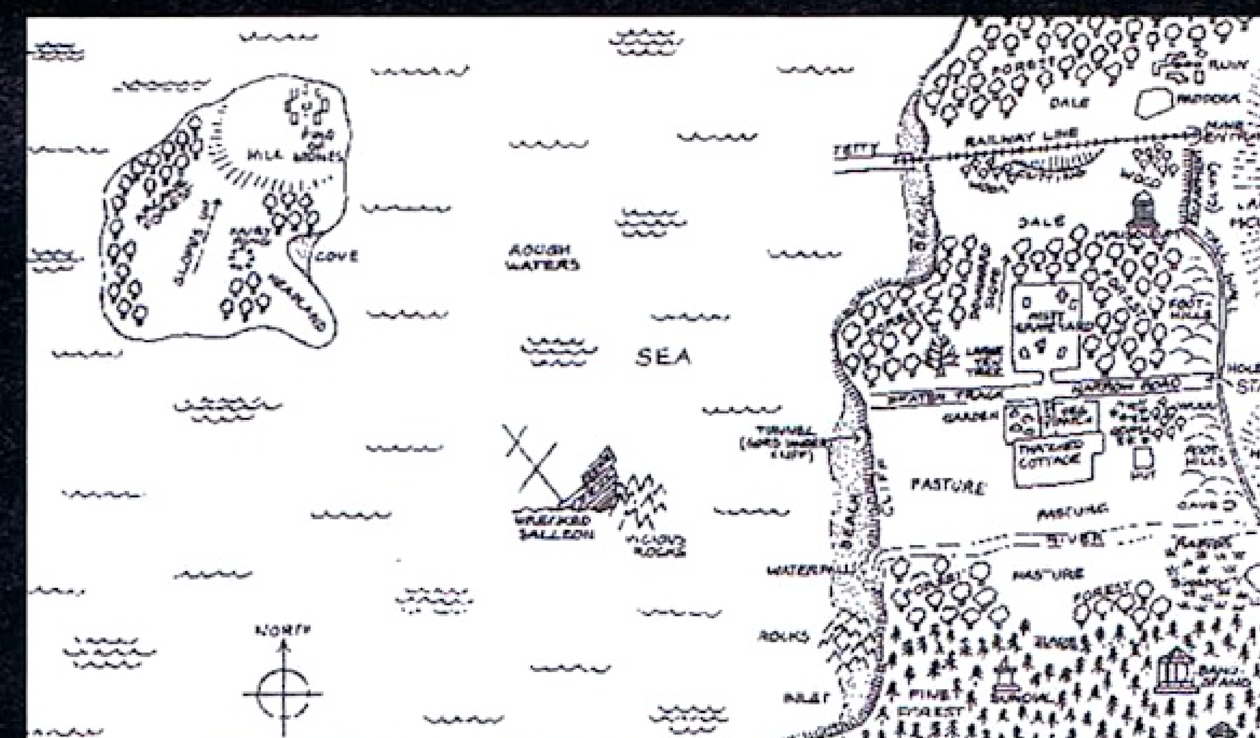
Beast






Richard Bartle (now, below left, in 1983, below right) no longer handles the day-to-day life of *Multi-User Dungeon*, working instead as a development consultant and game design lecturer at Essex University





Original format: **DECsystem-10**
Publisher: **MUSE (Multi-User Entertainment Ltd)**
Developer: **Roy Trubshaw and Richard Bartle**
Origin: **UK**
Original release date: **1978**



Another detail from the *MUD1* colour poster. Bartle claims to still have thousands of copies, and will distribute them for free to fans if they contact him via his website (www.mud.co.uk) and send a stamped self-addressed A5 envelope

Created before the advent of animated graphics, the world was visualised entirely through short text descriptions, used a text-only interface, and managed to create almost all of the core functionality and gameplay conceits that would only be rediscovered by *EverQuest* and its ilk decades later.

In 1978 **Richard Bartle** was in his first year at Essex University. After meeting with Roy Trubshaw he became interested in the older student's work trying to create a multiplayer version of *Adventure* (the first text adventure to be widely disseminated around the world).

"Roy had found a mechanism for writing to shared memory on the DECsystem-10 mainframe," recalls Bartle. "This meant that two instances of the same program could communicate with one another instantly, without having to use files."

Trubshaw created the very first version of *MUD* on his own, handing over completion of the third iteration to Bartle when his degree course ended. "When I took it over from Roy it wasn't really a game, although we all called it one," explains Bartle. "I made a conscious decision to 'gamify' it so that people could play it as a game if they wanted. I felt that if people had a reason to play then they might pick up on the freedom aspects, too. I wanted to create a place where people could have fun. I didn't want a traditional, directed kind of game – I wanted something as freeform as possible. The idea was to provide the structure and the rules, but make it completely open-ended."

Although the world itself was not persistent in the strictest sense (inventory objects are reset every few days), player statistics were and the ability to play the game via ARPANET, the emergent global network that would eventually become the internet we know today, gave *MUD* all the attributes of a modern MMORPG.

At this point a deal was signed with BT to set up a company (MUSE Ltd) and to write a fourth version of the software, which would become known as *MUD2*. Although it included all the content of *MUD1* it featured a larger world to explore and an expanded language parser.

A necessarily brief description of the increasingly bizarre series of events and people that then prevented *MUD* from achieving its true commercial potential are explained here elsewhere (see 'MUD: the opera') but, in short, the game was never really visible to the public at large, so its major influence continued to be with hardcore hobbyists. The term MUD itself became the name for a whole genre of titles that used the same basic concept and interface to create new experiences using virtually every theme possible, from science-fiction to pornography.

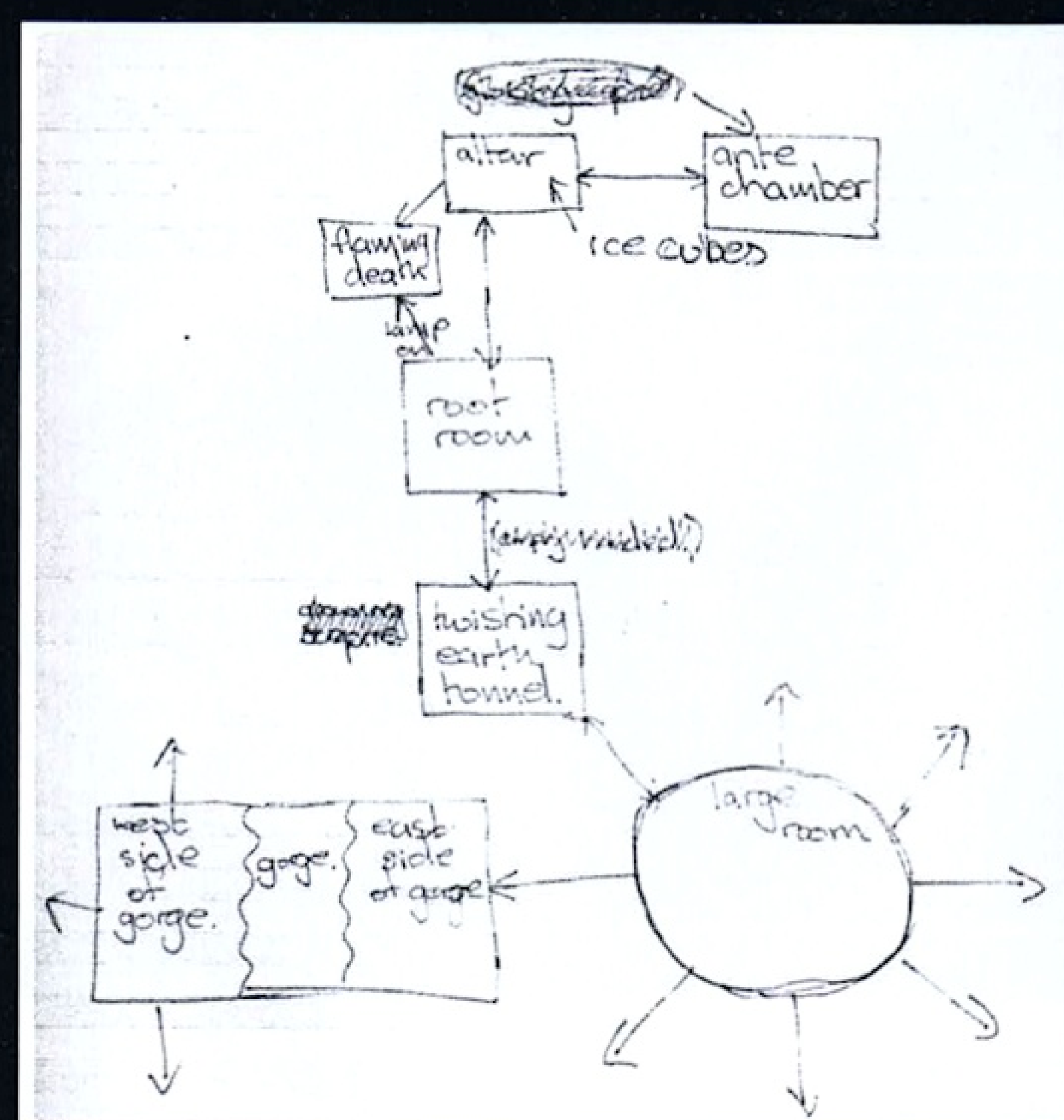
"MUDs in general did very well," says Bartle. "They owned ten per cent of the bits on the internet in 1994, before the word wide web. *MUD2* was tied up with contract problems at the time, though, so we didn't make the $1million a month that some other virtual worlds were making during that golden age."

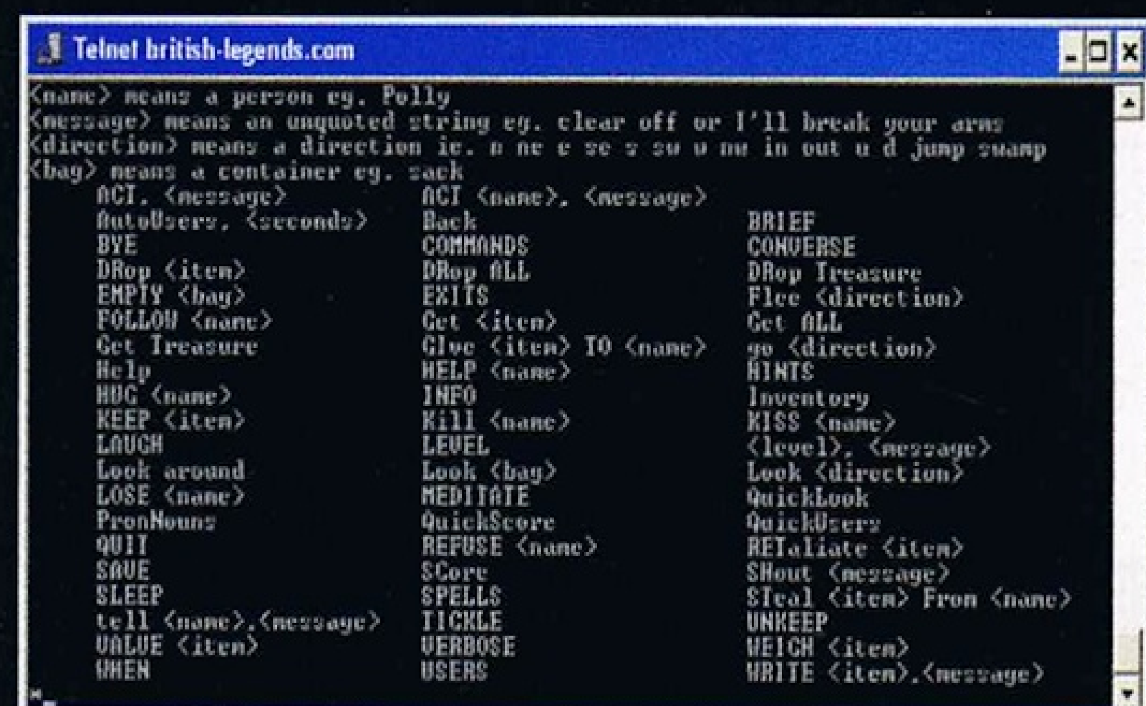
Deeply in debt

The advent of graphical MMORPGs such as *Meridian 59* and *EverQuest* appeared to signal a whole new era of social gaming, but their debt to *MUD* was deeper than some may assume. "Design decisions Roy and I made for *MUD* have been passed down unaltered through generations of virtual worlds, often without designers even realising that they had a choice in the matter," says Bartle.

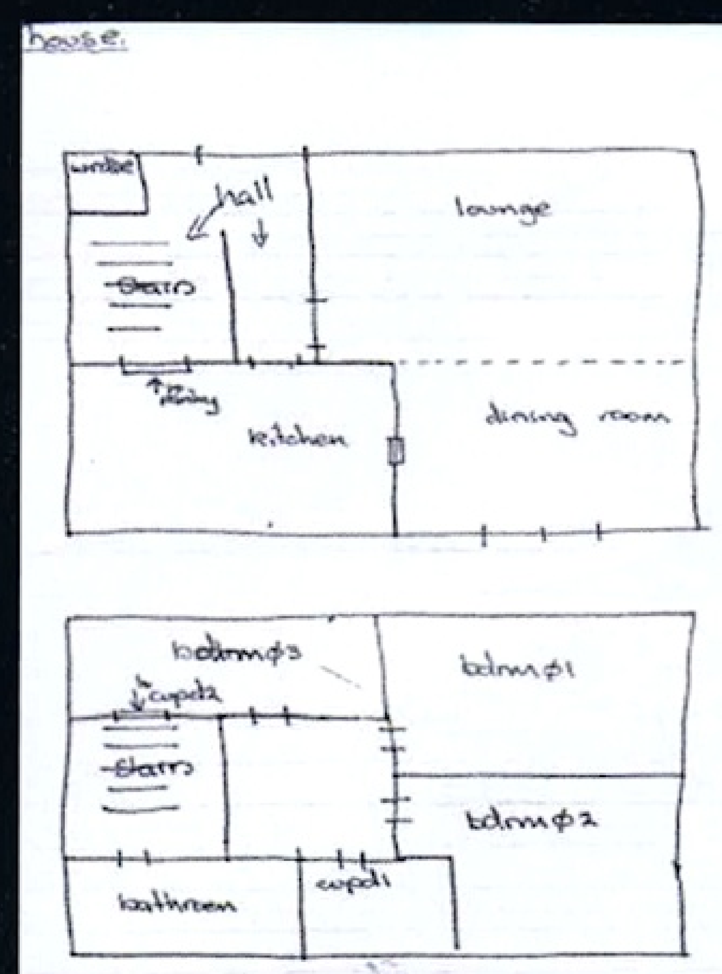
"The level system, for example, which I introduced into *MUD1* only after considering several alternatives,

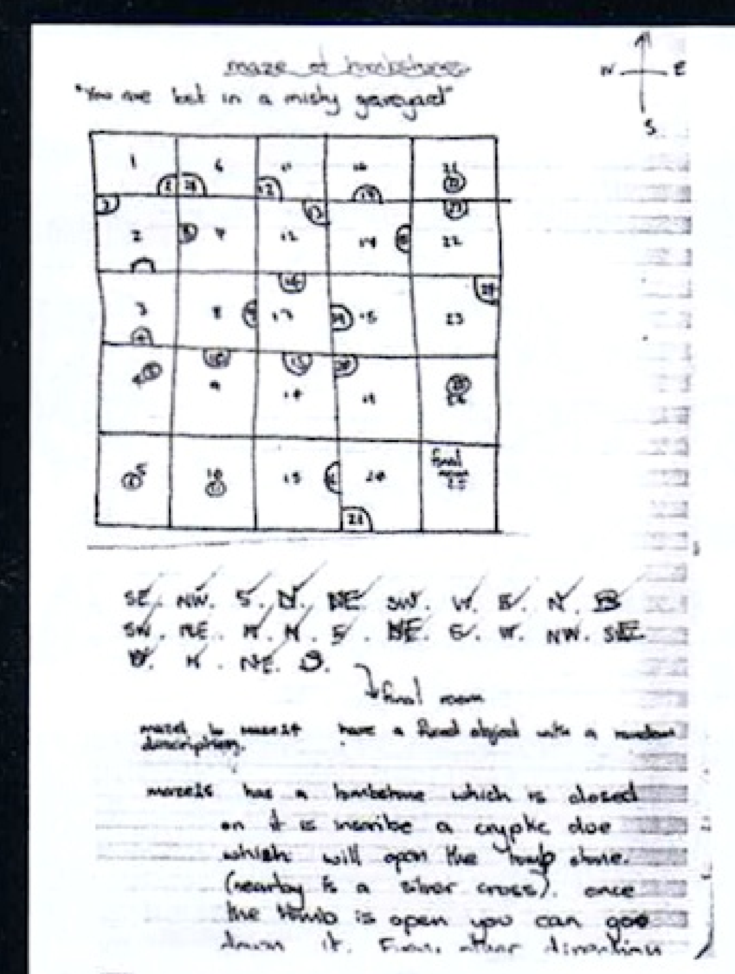
> "Design decisions for *MUD* have been passed down unaltered through generations of virtual worlds, often without designers even realising that they had a choice"





Above is another original design by Roy Trubshaw, this time of the tunnels beneath the yew tree. The screenshot shows the command list from *MUD1*. The game is referred to as *British Legends* – the name given to it by CompuServe to explain the spelling 'quirks'





On the left is an original map of one of the game's indoor areas drawn by Roy Trubshaw when he designed *MUD1*. The diagram on the right is his original design for the maze of tombstones

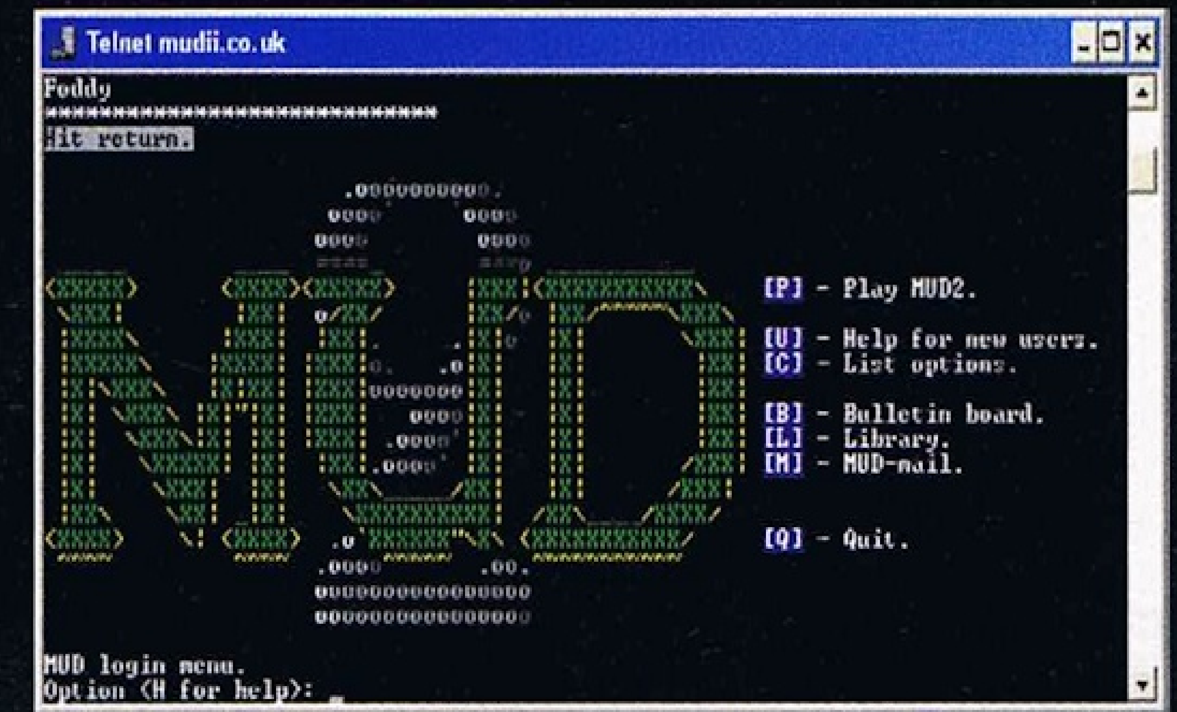
MUD: the opera

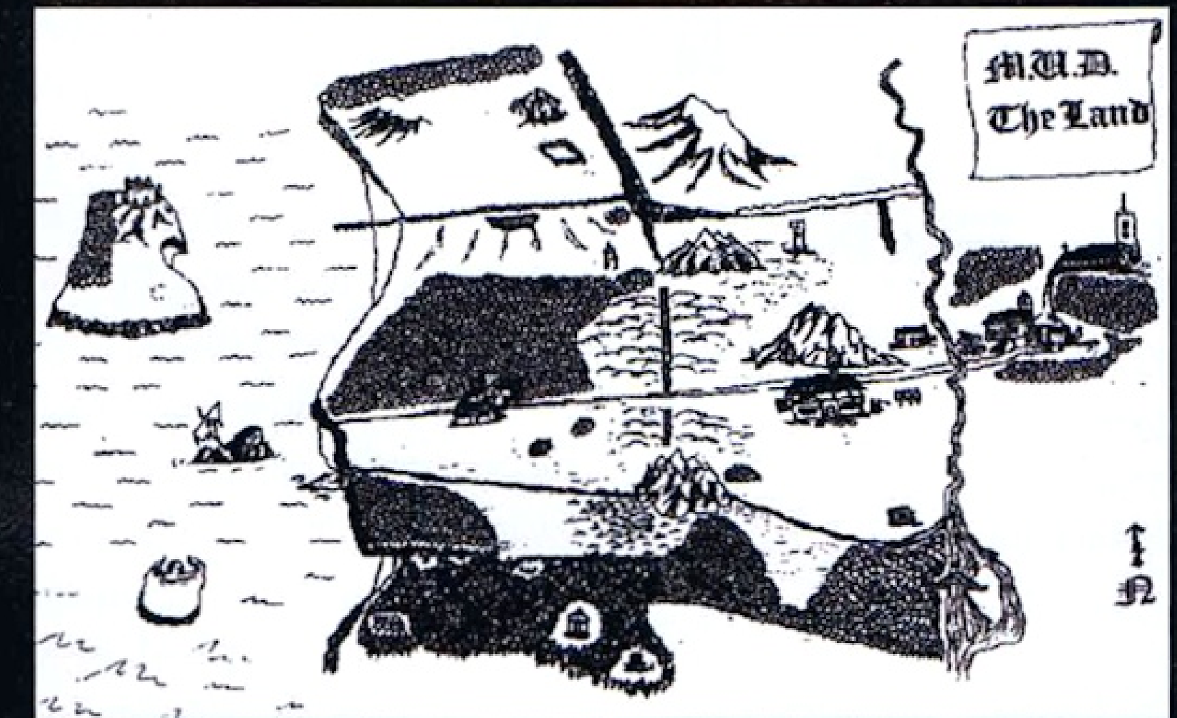
To describe *MUD*'s commercial history as 'troubled' is an understatement of gigantic proportions.

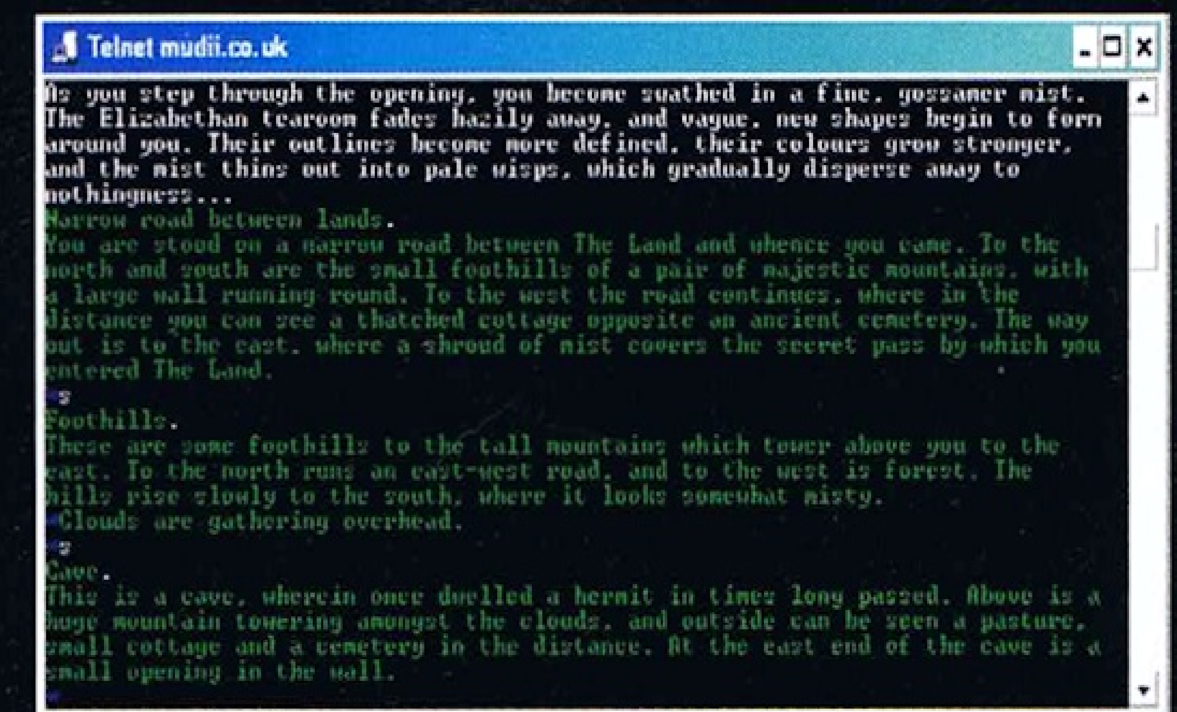
Simon Dally, the initial impetus behind MUSE, provided an early problem when a bout of manic depression saw him steal around AU$2M worth of antiquarian books, empty MUSE's bank account and shoot himself dead. Arguments over his will ensured that his shares in the company had to be bought from two of his brothers at considerable cost rather than see the firm fold.

In America, the attempts of Engage (Interplay's online division) to add a graphical frontend to the game were frustrated when the first choice of programmer transpired to have no green card and the second, who was a pacifist, left the company after his conscience objected to his working on some of Interplay's more violent titles. Things became no easier when disagreements over worldwide exclusivity lead to a suicide attempt from one of the UK operators. Meanwhile, attempts by Rick Mulligan, one of *MUD*'s champions in the US, to counter Engage's more unpleasant corporate machinations were limited by his frequent absence from their offices as he underwent gender reassignment therapy. When he finally left the company in disgust, as Jessica Mulligan, Engage had pulled the plug on *MUD* altogether and it was Wireplay's turn to add to the disappointment…

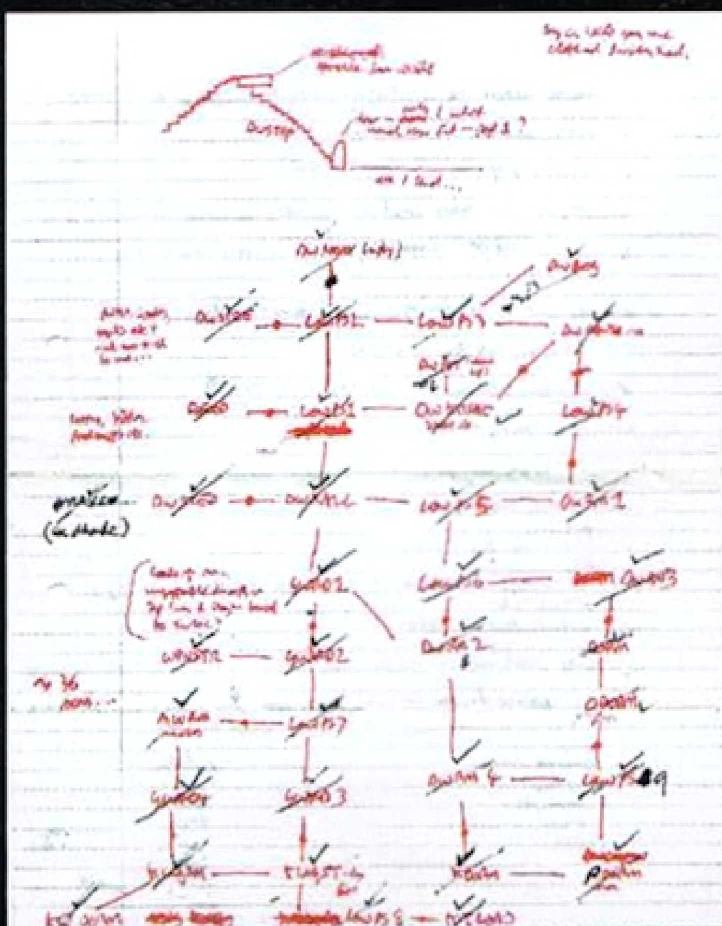
For further details consult Bartle's website at http://www.mud.co.uk/muse/backgrnd.htm

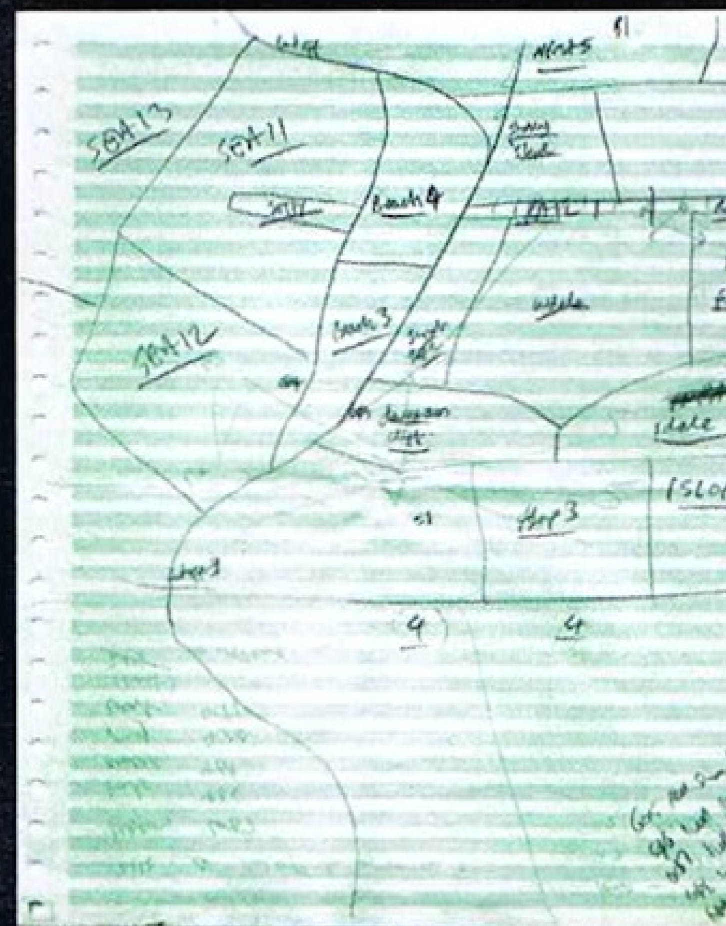






MUD2 featured coloured text – the only significant graphical upgrade in the franchise's 26-year history. The map of the *MUD2* world was created from an original sketch by Richard Bartle and appeared in the September 1984 issue of Micro Adventurer





Bartle designed most of *MUD* using the style of the map on the right, only occasionally resorting to a network of nodes, as seen in the original design for the Dwarven Citadel on the left. *MUD* fans tended to favour the latter method, due to its straightforward lack of ambiguity

does not get the same degree of consideration in new virtual worlds. They think 'How many levels shall we have?' rather than 'Shall we have levels?' yet a level system for a virtual world only really makes sense if there's an end to it – a point at which you can say you've won and stop playing it like a game."

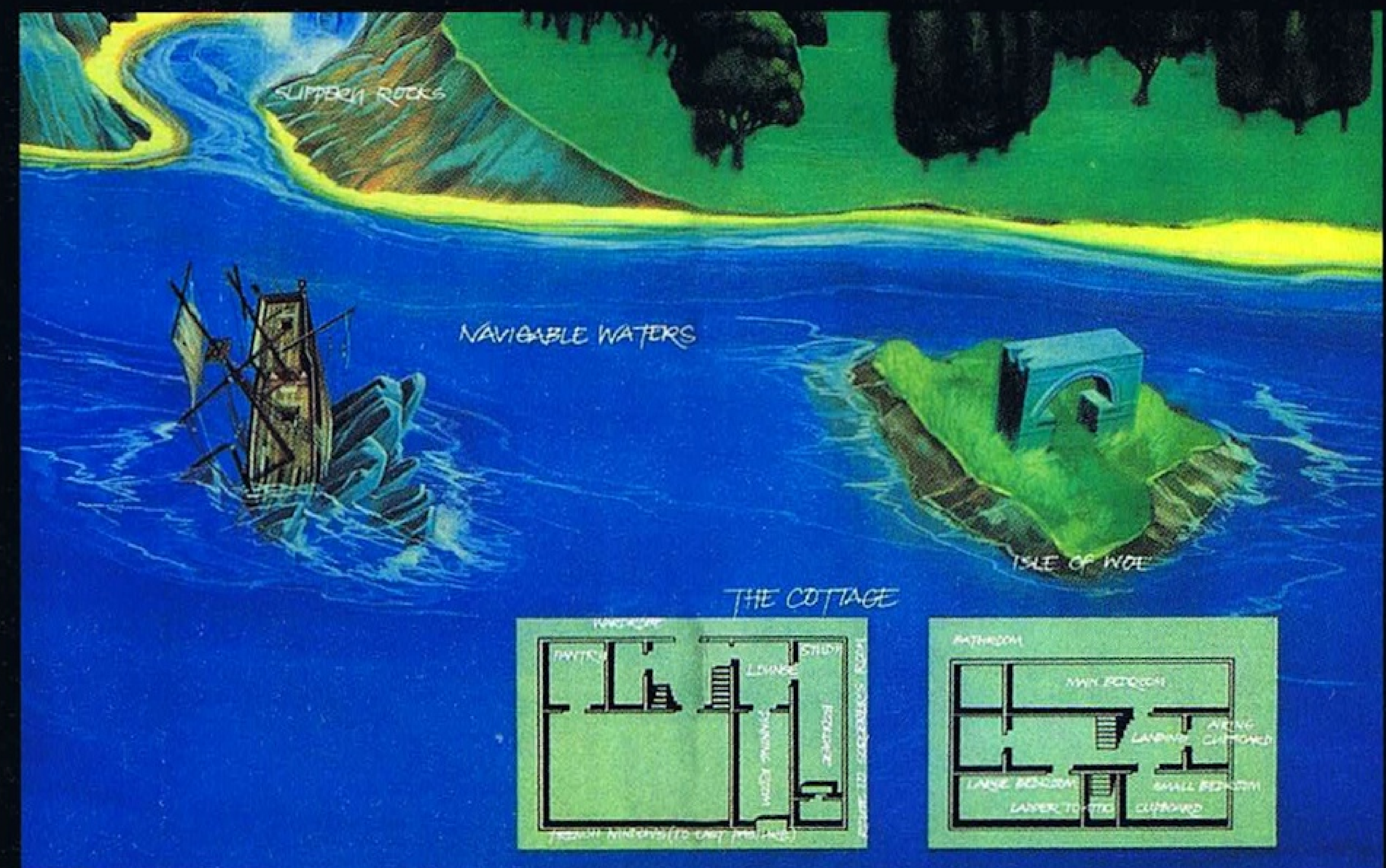
Bartle is admirably reluctant to pick out any other examples, for fear of self-aggrandisement, but there certainly does seem to be more incestuous behaviour within the MMORPG world than perhaps any other genre – with the programmers of *DIKU MUD* even going as far as forcing the developers of *EverQuest* to sign a sworn statement that the two did not share any source code.

It's difficult to know whether the fact that MMO games have advanced so little is a proud testament to *MUD*'s seminal design or a sad indictment of the lack of imagination in other developers. Of course, the most obvious difference between *MUD* and more modern games is the use of graphics, but it is unfair to consider this an inadequacy on *MUD*'s part. "I think you get a better sense of being in the world if it's in text; the effect of having a constant medium, rather than a mixed one, helps in that regard too," says Bartle. "Text is more expressive than graphics. It's also more descriptive – there are no smells in *EverQuest*.

"With text, I can talk to the mind. With graphics, I can only talk to the senses. I can get more depth out of text than I ever could out of graphics. I think text can be more evocative overall than graphics, but that doesn't mean I don't think graphics can't be evocative, or that in some areas their evocativeness can't exceed that of text."

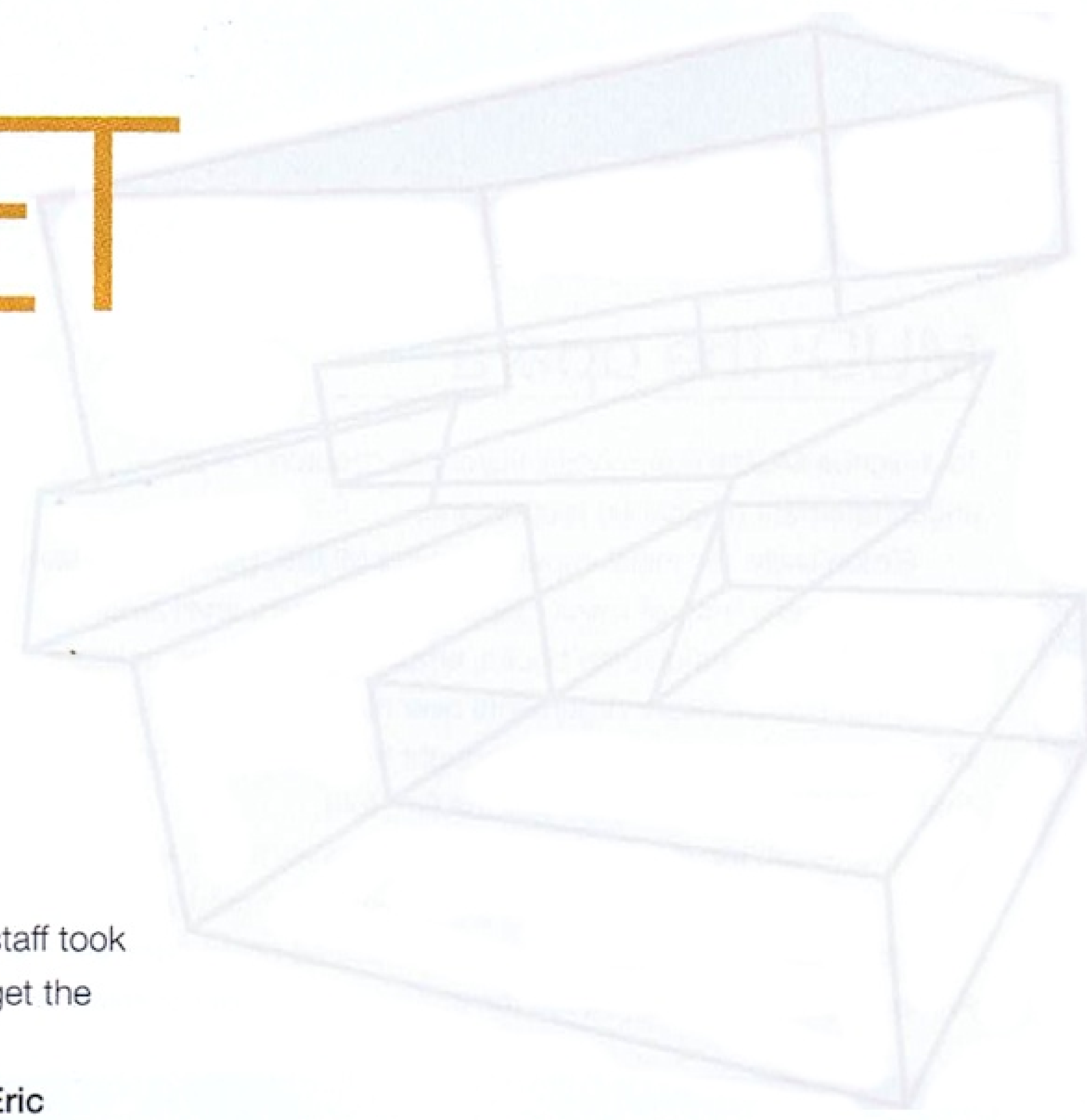
Although Bartle has no plans to add graphics to *MUD* ("Adding graphics would be as pointless as illustrating War And Peace") he does still have an interest in experimenting with new technology in the genre. As he points out: "I'm more likely to be able to get a grant to develop a virtual world for academic purposes than I am to get a publisher to stump up the kind of sums necessary for commercial success.

"It doesn't really matter anyway. Roy and I planted an acorn, the tree grew, it produced other acorns, these grew, and now we have a forest. Those trees will continue to grow irrespective of anything I do. I can plant another tree, sure, but these days I'd rather focus on the health of the forest than on individual trees." 



A detail from a colour poster of *MUD1* which was given out as part of the *MUD2* starter kit. Note that, except for the specific schematic of the cottage, the map only gives a general idea of the location of the game's other landmarks

RESET



Examining gaming history from **Edge**, five years ago this month



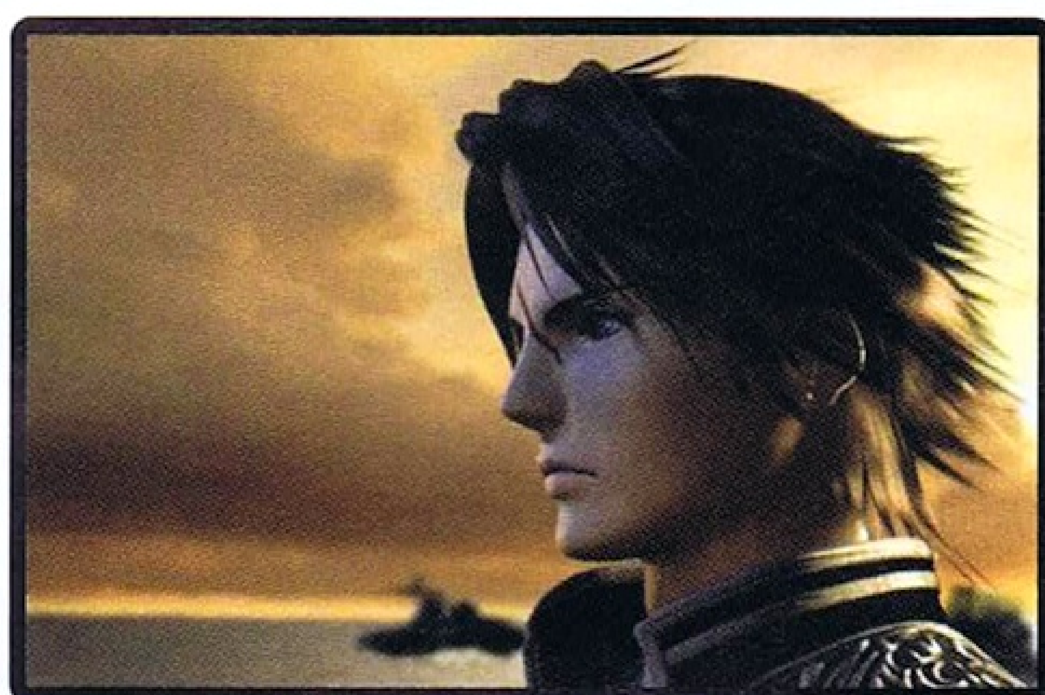
The best - November 1999
Final Fantasy VIII (PS2)

What a difference five years makes eh? At the time we were all trying to weigh up the implications of every tech-spec and shred of irrelevence that Sony could throw at us about the PlayStation 2. *The Bouncer*, *Dark Cloud* and *Street Fighter EX 3* were among the games supposed to give a glimpse of the future of interactive entertainment. Moreover, the comments about 'stable, widescale connectivity by 2001' might want a quick run through the old cynical crystal ball, too. It would appear that connectivity only gets as wide scale as the broadband penetration allows for in the first place.

Although other developers have since created far more questionable offerings, such as the snuff-themed *Manhunt*, Raven were defining the boundaries of acceptable gaming content with the super-violent *Soldier Of Fortune*. Some **Edge** members of staff took the US developers paintballing at the time to get the bloodlust flowing, then hit them for quotes.

"I hate to say it," said project coordinator **Eric Biessman**, not really sounding like he hated to say it at all, "but that's what a lot of people in the first person shooter market look for. Even *Half-Life* was pretty gruesome when you shot a marine." Not really the words of a man who was convinced he was doing the right thing, and rather ironic from the man behind the FPS that let you blow limbs apart with near surgical precision. Now, admittedly we can't see a third person version of that argument holding up for certain other controversial games, but, hey, maybe it's worth a shot.

A shot – get it? Oh, please yourselves…



Best game of the time…



Cutting Edge

SONY SHAKES GAMING WORLD WITH PLAYSTATION2

PlayStation 2

1



2



3



4



5



6



7



8

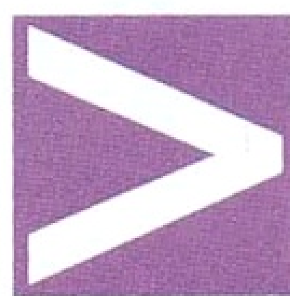


9



10

1. The hardware that kick-started a revolution (Emotion Engine not pictured)
2. A Sega boss catches sight of the future, courtesy of the *Shenmue* engine
3. Resistance members remained loyal to the console
4. Sony courted the key extraterrestrial demographic
5. Well, you'd have to be off the planet to appreciate *The Bouncer*, right?
6. PS2 *Gradius III and IV*: the in-game action didn't look like this, of course. You realised that, right?
7. Sega was countering with the likes of this…
8. And this…
9. And this!
10. Meanwhile, Nintendo pursued the 64DD add-on

inbox 

Communicate by post:
Letters, **Edge**, PO Box 1037, Bondi Junction NSW 2022
Or email (stating 'Inbox' in the message header):
edge@derwenthoward.com.au

I'm not one for complaining (though my girlfriend might disagree), but lately I've felt – how shall I put this? – slightly put upon. You see, while I'm thankful (very!) for having perfect 20/20 vision, I'm unfortunately disadvantaged in that I'm severely colour blind, or "markedly red/green colour blind," as my optician put it.

I've never really had trouble with anything before, not even traffic lights, though the RAAF did stop short of letting me join up as a weapons technician. (I wonder why?) But I digress. My problem, you see, is that I'm suffering at the hands of some damned fiendish game design, specifically meant to turn already tough games (for me, at any rate) into impossible monsters that make me want to pull what little hair I have left right out of their cosy little roots.

For example, imagine my sense of achievement as I finally reached the final boss of *Metroid Prime*. And imagine my sense of despair as I realised I had to match the colour of my wave beam to the colour of said boss's elbow pads. Time after time I would pull a weapon out of my not-inconsiderable shorts, sometimes managing to guess the right colour, but most times going through trial and error 'til I saw I was actually doing some damage. By which time, of course, my huge nemesis had already gone and changed colour anyway. Cheers for that.

Another game I'm struggling with a little is *Disgaea*. I'm enjoying it, but oh how I lament that I cannot chain those combos together with those lovely coloured pyramid thingies so thoughtfully left lying around each map. I read on forums how much fun people are having, but not me – I've had to give up on that part of the game altogether.

Oh, well, there's always draughts. (Black and white, you see?)

Even the old classic *Bust A Move* causes me all sorts of problems, helped a little by the fact that there are little designs within each coloured bubble which help me distinguish them on from another. It's the only game my girlfriend can beat me at. Of course, she sees this as an opportunity to berate my gaming skills, carefully nurtured for 20 years. I silently pray that the God of Thunder will strike her down.

I do have a point, and I'd like to bring it to the attention of game designers everywhere through your magazine, and that is to ask the designers to spare a thought for the nine per cent of male gamers with defective colour vision if they are going to put colour puzzles in games, and use a mechanism that will help us play along too. Use designs as well as colour, use textures and different shapes. That way we can play too! Would you kindly pass on my tiny grievance? (Though I swear if I ever come across another end boss like that of *Metroid Prime* I'll consider gouging out my own eyes and posting them off to Nintendo in protest.)

Mark Patience

PS I did actually beat that final boss, though luck had more to do with it than skill, methinks.

Let's be honest, with so many game developers failing at the hurdle of making something worth actually playing for any length of time, it's probably asking a bit too much to expect them to consider the subtlety of colour schemes. And then there are games that should be subtitled for deaf players and so and so on. Make no mistake: we have a long way to go before issues such as these become commonplace considerations.

Reading your analysis of the book First Person from Out There made me question the nature of the discourse within computer games study. The notion of one camp holding to a rigid narrative involvement doctrine and the other a pure experiential doctrine seems to disregard the differing and complex values held by gamers themselves. (By the way, I haven't read the book, and am basing my argument on your column.)

I, for example, am much more engrossed by 'pure' gaming dynamics such as *Advance Wars 2* than I am sitting through the endless (poor) cinematics of *Metal Gear Solid*. However, many may gain more pleasure from infusing themselves within the filmic mirror of cut-scenes. We all get our kicks from different places. Thus, you may argue that I sit within the 'experiential pleasure' camp.

When I was studying psychoanalysis of cinematic involvement, it appeared to have a point: cinema (and other artforms) require people to empathise and be drawn into the images and narrative. The reflective nature of the screen may be one process and it may be one device that manages this process. But where lies gaming? Before technological advances allowed for cut-scenes and other cinematic masturbation, they relied on a more base physical reaction – adrenaline. I mean, could any of us really internalise Pac-Man's voyage?

But this is where I come back to *Advance Wars 2*. Here is a game (with an admittedly weak storyline but vaguely engaging characters) devised purely in terms of tactical gameplay. Yet within this, I have no qualms about blowing up that APC filled with a team of good men. Why not? Because they are the enemy! They must be destroyed to save Yellow Comet! I love *AW2* for its mechanics; nevertheless, there is still some part of the empathic mirror staring back at me from that small (and un-backlit) screen. See, things aren't that black and white, they are usually a huge palette spread across a multitude of polygons...

Ascher Nathan

The problem with, as you put it, the nature of the discourse within computer games study is that it's so often not coming from the right places. So here, once more, is a pledge to look into an issue raised by **Edge**'s readers in a later edition.

It is a fascinating and sometimes disturbing process to see how business reacts to content creators and artists, not only in the software business but also in other activities of a similar nature such as writing, films and music. I believe there are definite indications that business practices stifle creativity (and indeed may ultimately

Imagine my sense of achievement as I reached the final boss of Metroid Prime. Imagine my despair as I realised I had to match the colour of my beam to the colour of its elbow pads



Perfect Dark, claims Reg, outstrips more modern FPS games such as *Doom 3* in almost all areas

be incompatible with art). Considerations such as franchising and market segmentation, as well as all the other paraphernalia of marketing, simply accentuate a trend towards bland, homogenised 'products', where original IP is stifled or at least neutered by marketing.

This is particularly true where the business deals with a creative product, since marketing sees itself as a creative discipline and thus feels entitled to contribute to the creative process. Fair enough – be creative with toothpaste; don't tell game designers how to write games.

I hasten to add that I recognise that marketing is a legitimate discipline of great value to the business world, but I take exception to the fact that the power-brokers are the middlemen, who could not be there without the people who create. Interestingly, there have been increasing noises in the industry about the lack of recognition for the key creators in the games industry – and indeed why shouldn't they be on a par with musicians, and why do they instead tend to be viewed as mere 'programmers', usually less well rewarded and treated than the 'suits'?

Nick Wood

The best marketers are those who know (and love) the products they're supposed to be shifting. It really isn't rocket science: employ people with a genuine understanding of what you're selling, and a desire to communicate its strengths to others, and everyone can be a winner. More videogame publishers need to appreciate that simply flogging similarly-sized boxes isn't what it's all about.

"But how are we supposed to sell 'risky', 'innovative' games?" is a question your average marketeer might ask. Well, that's something EA had to consider when it first had the option to publish a curio like *The Sims*.

As for game creators getting more credit for their work, we're getting back into the area of colour-blindness considerations. This is still a young industry, and it's only a matter of time before more productions are preceded with Sid Meier/American McGee-style intros. We have to hope, of course, that such grandstanding doesn't distract them from the business of making innovative software we want to play.

After just getting back from a three-day break in with my wife on Friday 13 August, all that was on my mind was the release of *Doom 3*. When I arrived home that night too late to go and buy it I completely ignored an airmail package waiting for me from the States, as all I wanted was *Doom*! The next morning couldn't come round quick enough – I went straight to the shop then back home with my new purchase. My wife was out for the rest of the day. Yes! I could lose myself completely in my beloved joy!

After installation I was in totally engrossed, then it struck me after five minutes of play: what the hell was this? What had id been up to for so long to try to create a half-breed child of *Doom* and *Half-Life*? What were they thinking? I accept the graphics are fantastic, but something was missing. It didn't feel quite right when you unleashed your fury on the hellspawn, as if you were shooting paper cutouts rather than solid, living monsters. Even the weapons didn't feel right.

So there I was, completely let down by this so-called FPS killer of a title… Then I remembered the airmail package I had so wrongfully ignored. I couldn't open it quick enough, realising it was what I had bought a week earlier on eBay from the States. It was *Perfect Dark* for my US N64.

Now this it what I call an FPS – it's now four years old and it still rocks. I haven't put it down since starting on the Perfect difficulty setting straight off. Who needs graphics so lifelike? What we need is a game that grabs you by the nuts and doesn't let go 'til you're screaming for more in some sadistic way. We need more games like this four-year-old one that offers more in five minutes than *Doom 3* could offer in a lifetime. Please, Rare, where are you when we need you most? Programmers need to look at these games and realise what made them so good.

The likes of *GoldenEye*, *Perfect Dark* and *Far Cry* got it right by totally engrossing you with their weapons, their enemies. OK, some of the monsters may not have looked great, but they felt right when you hit them with the arsenal you were carrying. I just can't believe id got it so wrong.

Reg

Well, it's true that *Far Cry 2* can't come soon enough (the original is one of our favourite PC games of the year so far), but you're going to be waiting even longer for another first-person shooter from the boys at Rare, and even longer still for something to match up to the quality of *GoldenEye*. But, yes, eBay is our friend.

I ask one (though very blunt) question: to what extent is videogaming theory relevant to today's videogamers? Is academic endeavour pertaining to videogames there merely to appease the demand for game designers to scavenge for new ideas, or for the genuine need for some sort of explanatory power, some sort of sustenance away from one's previous reliance on other media?

Though much is owed to your publication for having afforded much interest into theoretical studies, one cannot help but feel that there still lies a stark disregard for academic plight on your part.

By all means encourage game designers to pick away at what to them is decipherable from a technical perspective, but let it be known that such investigations (theoretical or otherwise) are done not for their appeasement, but for one's own ratification – due moreover to fledgling methodologies.

It is not that I propose 'game designers do their job and we'll get on with ours' but that a little constructive criticism based on slightly differing fields of perspective would be greater appreciated.

Toops

Hey, what happened to the letters complaining about some lacklustre follow-up to a classic getting five out of ten? That's what we want to know.



Considerations such as franchising and market segmentation, as well as all the other paraphernalia of marketing, simply accentuate a trend towards bland, homogenised 'products'

Next month





WAR IS COMING: NOVEMBER 2004

WWW.KILLZONEPS2.COM







Exclusive to
PlayStation®2

ISSUE 2 NOVEMBER 2004
AUS $8.95 NZ $9.95 (INC GST)
PRINT POST APPROVED PP:255003/07225



